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Isaac Asimov
THE CLOCK IN THE SKY

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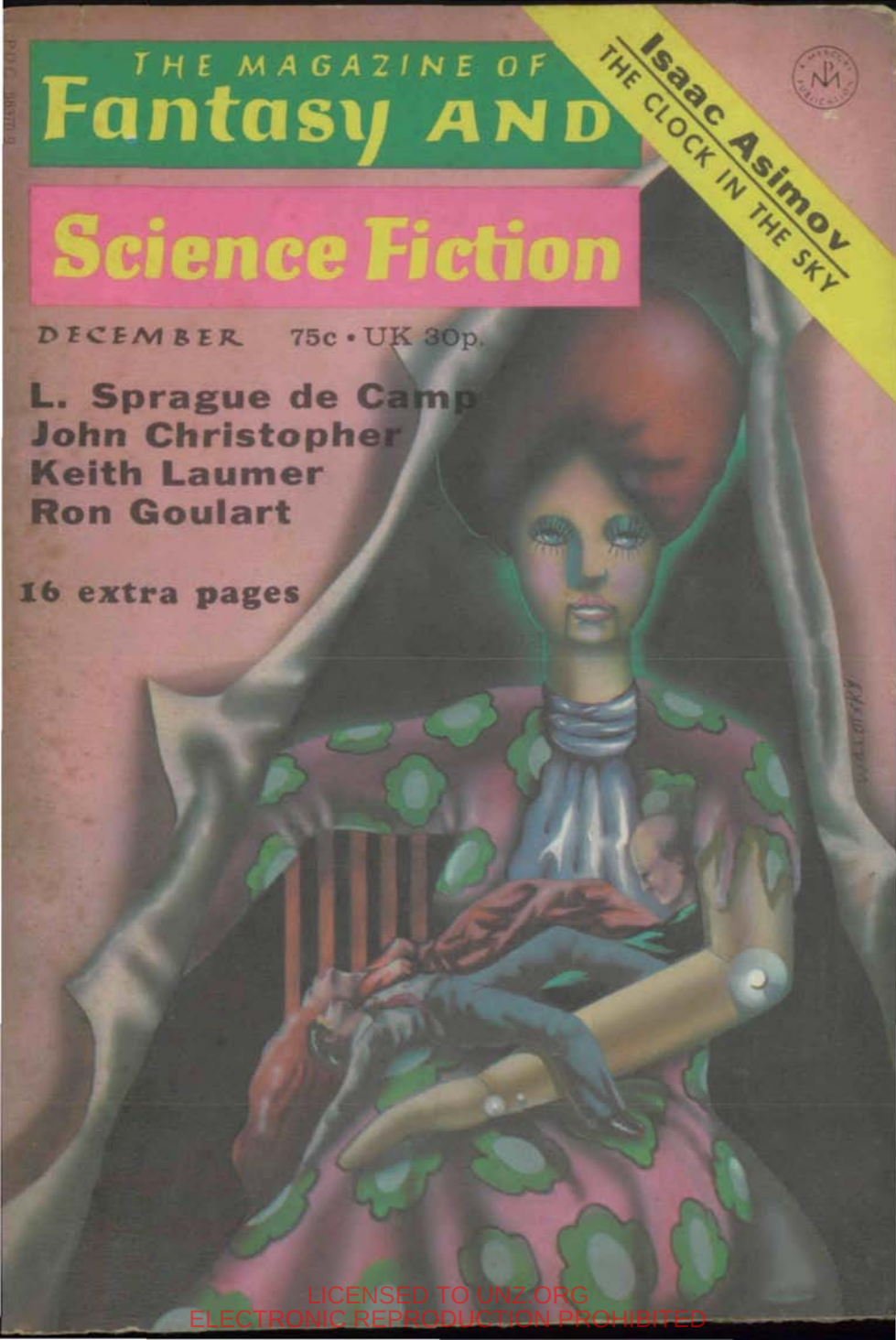

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

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This is only Hal Moore's second story for F&SF, but we've already seen enough to know that he has a gift for telling unusually colorful and absorbing stories. Witness this tale of Doctor Dominoe and his doll Valencia, on a strange mission of vengeance in a small beach town called Oceana.

Doctor Dominoe's Dancing Doll

by HAL R. MOORE

SEA FROTH LACED THE AIR the day Doctor Dominoe came to Oceana, bringing with him Valencia, the marvelous dancing doll.

Along the beach front, waves seemingly higher than the tankers standing offshore pounded out timpani rhythms on oil-streaked sands, and the wind moved spindrift inland.

Two white-haired men, more resembling gnarled twists of driftwood than humans, reveled in the brittle salt air on a solitary bench.

"Near gale force," one said, biting the words as if sculpturing them in stone.

"Aye, gale force." His companion huddled within folds of a long misused topcoat.

They were the first to mark Doctor Dominoe's debut. He came along the broad concrete walk, picking his way precisely among gaping cracks and swirling eddies of black and grey sand. Behind him he pulled a wooden wagon, rattling and clanging on iron-rimmed wheels, bearing upon it a solitary steamer trunk.

"Who's that?" the white-haired man demanded, jabbing a gnarled elbow into the ribs of his companion.

"I ain't saw him before."

"Ain't from hereabouts. Lookit the furrin labels on the trunk."

"Look at the man—iffn you can call him that."

As they spoke the stranger neared their bench. He paused in his laborious journey. A left hand as thin and bony as turkey claws lifted to the brim of a

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black stovepipe hat in salute. A long white slash opened in a face gaunt as a starving horse, revealing tombstone rows of teeth.

"Good day to you, gentlemen."

"'Day."

"Enjoying the sea air, I perceive. Brisk. Invigorating. Yes, indeed."

"It's gonna blow some."

"Indeed." Already the tails of his white-on-black polka dot frock coat stood straight out behind him, and a black string tie whipped garrote-like around a bobbing Adam's apple. Pipe-stem legs, cased in black trousers, bottomed out in high-button shoes. Even as he bowed he towered high over the men on the bench. "Dominoe's the name, gentlemen. Doctor Eustace P. Dominoe, prestidigitator extraordinaire, mentalist and seer of the future, possessor of Valencia, the world's only walking, talking, dancing doll." Despite the wind he swept his eighteen-inch stovepipe hat from his head, revealing a rounded dome sparsely grown with fine black hair.

The men nodded, saying nothing, and silently Doctor Dominoe assigned to them the names Flotsam and Jetsam.

"Well, then. I hie myself onward to yon domicile, the hotel Mar View." And quartering the wind, he resumed his solitary journey.

"Whatta you make of *that?*" Flotsam demanded of Jetsam.

"Some kinda snake oil medicine man."

"'Ja see the shape of his hands? Like a gravedigger's."

"What are those like?"

"Don't get smart. Notice how pale? You could almost see bones through the skin."

"See his skull through his face skin, for that matter."

"He's a sick man. Prestidigiator, huh?"

"What's that?"

"I think it means pickpocket—but I can't imagine anyone admitting to it in public."

A gust of wind hurled spray into their faces, and with the perverseness of age they leaned into it, delighting in discomfort, savoring thoughts of worse to come.

"I can tell you one thing," Flotsam continued.

"What?"

"He ain't here for no good. No good at all."

Jetsam grunted in agreement, and satisfied with their evaluation, they waited the coming of the storm.

In his second-floor hotel room Doctor Dominoe surveyed his surroundings with less than pleasure. Exposed water pipes, long unpainted, climbed a corner from floor to ceiling, and a great brown stain spread

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across an ocher wall in a surrealistic pattern of spreading wings. On the floor a cockroach strolled arrogantly across worn and tangled carpet threads.

Doctor Dominoe frowned in distaste, wrinkling his huge nose which dipped beak-like over his upper lip, but made no move toward the roach. Instead he very gently opened the steamer trunk.

"It's a good room, you'll like it," Mrs. Mullery, the proprietress, had assured him. "It's not fancy, but it's clean. You won't find no bedbugs and coots and such in *my* hotel. An' it's got a view."

Now, even as he opened the trunk he considered the "view" and chuckled raspingly.

"By George, indeed the room does have a view, Valencia." With the two sides of the trunk opened in a huge V, he gently, lovingly, unbuckled straps and removed padding from around a slight figure within the trunk.

She was exactly five feet tall, and as Doctor Dominoe well knew, she weighed 100 pounds. In face and form she resembled a girl of twelve, perhaps thirteen years. But for the lifeless pallor rivaling even Doctor Dominoe's translucent and parchment-like skin, she looked perfectly normal. That, and glassy and staring eyes focused unblinkingly ahead regardless of how she was moved.

Doctor Dominoe moved her carefully indeed. "Over here, Valencia. You may have this overstuffed chair—hideous, hideous, but comfortable, I imagine. I'll face it to the window where it is cool. Oh—we're above the midway. If only you could see the filthy roofs and backs of the concessions. A panorama, my dear, a virtual vista of tar paper and mounded trash and garbage uncollected for, lo, these many days. The rides, the carrousel—can you hear the calliope? A recording, and a bad one at that. Oh, yes, out there somewhere is the ocean. We *are* staying at the Mar View. *Mar View!*" Again he chuckled, a sound like the breaking of small sticks.

As he talked he ministered to the figure. First he settled her comfortably into the chair. Then he brushed her brown and frizzled hair, tenderly, with a brush made of tortoise shell and pig bristles. He smoothed her soft, puff-sleeved organdy dress as best he could and removed patent leather shoes from small feet. Finally, with love and tenderness, he sponged her face with a damp cloth.

Only then did he allow himself to sit on the brass bed, which sagged miserably under his weight. She looked comfortable.

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Which was more than he could say for the town of Oceana. For the storm, now surging in from seaward, struck beach, midway, and town with thundering fury and raging rain.

Doctor Dominoe smiled as sheets of water cascaded against the window, altering the "view" to one of kaleidoscopic color and pattern.

"'T ain't fit weather for man or beast, someone said, Valencia. But that can't stop old Doctor Dominoe, can it? Time is burning along, Valencia, taking its toll of you and I." He opened the door and bent nearly double to pass through. Hatless this time, he stepped out into the rain, a smile as wide as his face opening the hollow graveyard of his mouth to the storm's assault.

Bald head down, polka dot frock coat whipping behind him like the carapace of a drunken ladybug, he plodded doggedly into the wind.

"*She* walks and she *talks*, ladies and gentlemen, she dances the *polka*. *She* laughs and sings and she *cries*, and you would swear she is alive! Her name is Valencia, the world's one and only dancing doll. *She* will amaze and astound you. Brought across the oceans from the deep forests of Transylvania where she was the constant companion of a famous Gypsy magician. Brought to you at *enormous* expense, so that *you* may see her at absolutely *no* cost to yourself.

"Now, step a little closer, ladies and gentlemen, *step* up to the stage, this is a performance you may see only *once* in a lifetime. That's it, step in a little closer."

Doctor Dominoe gestured to the slowly gathering crowd, spreading his spaghetti-thin arms in a sweeping embrace, then pulling them slowly toward himself.

Valencia sat stiff-backed, staring blindly into the crowd from a wooden chair set up on a small stage where Doctor Dominoe had succeeded in renting a booth.

Many of the booths along the midway squatted dark and empty. The depression had taken its unrelenting toll of marginal activities, but no matter how hard the times people were willing to part with a few pennies and dimes in exchange for brief moments of escape. So some survived.

Across the way he could see the Chamber of Horrors, and to the east of that an oriental gift shop, an auction house, and a medical lecture booth where smooth-talking men sold liver remedies and, he supposed, snake oil.

To the west of the Chamber was an open space leading to

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the pier, upon which stood the Fun House, Puzzle Town and the Cyclone Racer. As he talked the clatter of the train of cars being ratcheted up to the first incredible plunge rattled in supremacy over the other sounds of the midway. Even the scratchy recording of the calliope, which so offended his sensibilities, was momentarily subdued. The terrified screams of passengers periodically caught everyone's attention, and he timed his spiel accordingly.

A typical beach front amusement park. Except that this one happened to be in Oceana. And Doctor Dominoe and Valencia had not just "happened" by. They were there on a mission. Doctor Dominoe sensed that the mission was progressing well.

Doctor Dominoe gathered in a few more people with his persuasive gestures. The size of the crowd did not really matter for now, but his pride was involved.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, Valencia, the dancing doll!"

She moved stiffly at first, as if mechanical joints too long unoiled or swollen by the dampness of the recently passed storm were balky. But as she progressed her movements became less jerky. She danced a brief polka to the tune of a phonograph record. Then she sang a squeaky-voiced song in a foreign tongue which no one understood but Doctor Dominoe.

The marvel was that before their very eyes the doll was dancing and singing, albeit doing neither with particular grace.

When she was finished, Doctor Dominoe left his platform and moved among the crowd. Their act was routine. "What has this gentleman in his pocket, Valencia?" Valencia sat in her chair again, blindfolded.

"He has a gold pocket watch. Inside the cover is a photograph of a young woman."

And the man would produce from his pocket a gold watch, a picture of a young woman on the inside cover. The crowd would murmur in wonder.

"What is this lady holding, Valencia?"

"She has. . .I do not understand. . .the vibrations are clouded. It seems to be a dining utensil. Perhaps from the Far East."

And the woman would have in her hand a salad fork recently purchased at the oriental gift shop.

The crowd would draw back in wonder and amazement.

Doctor Dominoe moved confidently. More questions, more objects correctly identi-

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fied with uncanny accuracy. But mostly he was interested in the comments of the crowd.

"It's a trick," an uneasy woman whispered.

"Sure. But what *kind* of trick?"

"It's all done with mirrors."

"It's black magic, what it is," murmured another, crossing herself piously.

"Why do you suppose he wears that garish coat? Have you ever seen one like it?"

"I ain't never seen no polka dot coat before, no."

"D'ja see them hands?"

Indeed, as he moved through the crowd, Doctor Dominoe's hand would occasionally flutter near some person bold enough to stand near him, and in a moment he would return a key chain, or lipstick, or handkerchief.

To the rear of the crowd the two old men whom Doctor Dominoe had named Flotsam and Jetsam muttered together.

"That's plain unbelievable."

"I *told* you prestidigiator meant pickpocket. You better check your belongin's."

"*For* what?"

"I tell you, he's evil. Look how he stands above everyone in the crowd."

"*I* ain't scared."

"You ain't got enough sense to be scared when you ought to be. Mark my words—this man means no good."

"He means to make a few pennies for hisself foolin' people, is all."

A snort and a sidelong glance of contempt.

"*And* now, ladies and gentlemen, the moment you have been waiting for! I, Doctor Eustace P. Dominoe, prestidigitator, reader of minds and seer of the future, will read the fortunes of four lucky people. *And*, ladies and gentlemen, this is *free*, there is no cost of any kind.

"However—the strain on my mental and physical capacities is extraordinary. For to read the secrets of the *past*, *present* and *future* requires intense concentration, intense indeed." He smiled at the audience and they smiled with him, in understanding.

"But, tomorrow, ladies and gentlemen, Doctor Dominoe, who sees all, knows all and tells all, will be available to a select few clients each day for the small, the tiny, the infini*tesimal* sum of twenty-five cents, one mere quarter part of a dollar. *You* will be amazed at Doctor Dominoe's knowledge of your *past*, your *present*, and your *future!* But for now—ah, two ladies and two gentlemen. Step right up, step right up." He indicated four people out of the crowd.

The first, a woman, he guided into a small building

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behind the stage. He left Valencia sitting in her chair, pausing just long enough to remove her blindfold. "Keep an eye on them for me, my dear." He winked conspiratorially at the crowd, and they laughed in appreciation. The doll would watch them and see that no one left. Ha-ha-ha.

Flotsam again jabbed Jetsam in the ribs. "No tellin' *what* he's doin' to her in there."

"You mean like steal her pocketbook?"

"Don't be a fool."

"You're the old fool. What can he *do*, 'sides tell her fortune, like he said?"

"You're just too dumb to understand."

"Hush." The woman emerged from the dark doorway, her round, somewhat jowly face set in a mask of wonder.

"My god," the woman gasped. "My god. He—he knows *everything* about me."

"Doctor Dominoe sees all, knows all and tells all," he repeated gently. The woman was impressed but far from pleased with her reading. Well, could he help it if she was just a middle-aged, narrow-minded schmuck?

"My name, my family, personal things. . .and he said I would. . .he said. . ."

But Doctor Dominoe's revelation was to remain a secret between her and her seer. She clamped her mouth shut tightly, grimacing as if in pain.

The next volunteer, a man, stepped reluctantly forward when Doctor Dominoe beckoned. He had almost to be pushed into the darkened doorway. But after five minutes he returned, shoulders back, a swagger in his walk, an enormous smirk distorting his face.

"I can tell you one thing about this guy," the man said, gesturing expansively toward the smiling Doctor Dominoe. "He has it all *figured* out!" Still smirking, he strode purposefully through the crowd and disappeared down the midway. Toward—Doctor Dominoe was more than certain—the illicit and clandestine skin show at the far corner of the midway.

The last two went in apprehensively, and each came out as close-mouthed as the first woman.

"And that, ladies and gentlemen, concludes our show for today. Come back tomorrow to again see, hear and be amazed by the one, the only, Doctor Dominoe and by Valencia, the dancing doll." Turning his spotted back on them, he gently lifted Valencia from her chair and carried her through the mysterious doorway.

A single light burned overhead, bare and of tiny wattage, but Doctor Dominoe needed

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little light. He placed Valencia on a chair, before a round table draped in a cloth upon which had been embroidered the signs of the zodiac. A small crystal ball gleamed eerily.

Valencia needed care, and Doctor Dominoe administered to her. He secured a damp cloth and lovingly sponged her face and arms, wiping away small accumulations of grime which darkened her pale skin. He spoke as he worked, fitting words between grunting chuckles.

"The best cold reader in the business, if I do have to say so myself. I wish you could have seen those marks. Absolutely unbelievable."

When he finished sponging, brushing and combing Valencia, Doctor Dominoe settled her into the steamer trunk. He carefully adjusted the straps and padding so that she would not rattle around during the lengthy haul back to their hotel room—with the "view."

He left the trunk open while he washed his own face and hands and combed his thinning hair carefully over the top of his head. He smiled at himself in the mirror of a small compact which he produced from inside his polka dot frock coat. A touch of powder on his high cheekbones and shiny temples reassured him.

"They will come to us, Valencia. If not tomorrow, then the next day. Or the next. But they will come to us. Each and every one." And he chuckled, making a noise like breaking bundles of small sticks.

Doctor Dominoe left Valencia resting comfortably in the overstuffed chair, facing the window. Mild weather, following the storm, presented them with a polished crystal sky and a soft breeze scented with memories of salt, sand and kelp. Only the ocean, still riled, far from calm, rumbled and grumbled angrily along the shore. Even at the hotel, a block from the ocean, Doctor Dominoe could hear the surly pounding of the surf.

"Rest, Valencia, gather your strength for the next assault. I shall stroll along the beach front. See if I can garner some bit of intelligence about our community." He chuckled, and after arranging Valencia's tiny hands serenely in her lap, slipped quietly away.

It had been a long, long trip for Doctor Dominoe and Valencia. From Brussels where Valencia became Doctor Dominoe's alter ego. Then the tour through Europe. Finally America, and now the insignificant beach town of Oceana where they now were ready for the final phase of Monica de Monica's elaborate and ven-

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omous scheme. A long, hard road.

"First you must make them come to you freely for the magic to work. Then—strike them one by one. Each by each, wither them with this vilest of all Gypsy curses," the old woman had insisted over and over again. The words lay inside his head like pools of molten lead, tending to slosh slowly as he walked, searing his mind. Over and over and over again, Monica de Monica had repeated the words, etching forever the vile catechism of black and bloated revenge inside Doctor Dominoe's skull.

"Let death by thy blessing," the curse began. "For only in death shalt thou. . ."

Doctor Dominoe closed his conscious thought to the balance of the curse. There would be no forgetting. Over and over and yet over again, the prune-skinned old woman had read from the volume of ancient Gypsy magic.

By candlelight in Prague, by lantern light in Istanbul, by firelight in Nice. By moonlight if necessary, or by the grey filtered haze which passed for daylight during long English winters. Wherever and whenever there was time, the curse was practiced as a prologue to her lengthy and rambling discourse, the spewing out of the vitriolic dregs of her hatred. Hatred of people whom she had never seen.

Now exactly two years to the day after the old woman's death, Valencia sat staring blindly out a grimy window, and Doctor Dominoe strode along the midway of Oceana's amusement park. And in the small city, with its gentle hills rolling slowly upwards to a high, oil-rich plateau, four people were soon to be caught in his tightening net.

"Let death be thy blessing, for. . ."

Doctor Dominoe shook the frightful words deep into his subconscious again, and seeking diversion, he paused before a small platform similar to his own. Borazini, the fire eater, stood poised and ready to demonstrate his skill. Doctor Dominoe watched, fascinated despite himself, by the sight of orange flames flickering from Borazini's torches.

Orange flame. Black smoke. People running, screaming. Panic. Fire on the midway!

However, the scene blazing in Doctor Dominoe's mind didn't burn before him. It flared in a memory some twenty years old. A small traveling carnival group bedded down for the night, settled finally after the last straggling mark had moved on.

The memory might have passed, for it was an exceeding-

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ly painful one. But the crying of a baby in his mother's arms, a baby frightened by Borazini's antics, brought that long ago scene into sharp focus.

The Luceros, Emily and Thomasino, followed the carnival and lived in a converted truck. Within the ungainly van they had constructed primitive but livable quarters. They carried a simple, canvas-roofed stand from which they dispensed foot-long hot dogs and large hamburgers of some doubtful content.

The Luceros were a simple couple, good-hearted, generous with those less fortunate than themselves, and after eighteen years of marriage, childless.

In the course of its travels the carnival passed once through the California beach town of Oceana. Some of the troupe never left, forming the nucleus of what was to become the "amusement park," in reality a loose collection of concessions which were clustered together for mutual benefit.

But the Luceros had gone on with the bulk of the carnival. And whereas they had arrived childless, they departed the proud parents of a baby girl—without benefit of Emily ever having been pregnant.

No miracle had occurred. Only a transaction between a frightened young woman, a minister, a police sergeant, and an anonymous citizen who also provided the Luceros with $100 for "immediate expenses."

The Luceros had never questioned the legality or considered the morality of the transaction. They knew only that through the offices of two unlikely men they were presented with a child which they could claim as their own. All they had to do was move on, quickly. The police sergeant had made that very clear. The sooner the carnival left, the fewer who would find themselves in jail. The Luceros left the next day.

The middle-aged couple had been able to indulge themselves in being parents for only five days when tragedy struck. Fire broke out suddenly inside the truck. There was speculation that the cat had knocked over the kerosene lamp. The truck became a raging inferno in seconds.

LaVera de Monica was a Gypsy palmist with the carnival. She heard terrible screams from the front of the van, fully engulfed in flames, and the baby's wail near the rear.

LaVera could never explain why she raced into that furnace. But the rear door hung partially open. She threw it back and plunged inside.

"I thought I had stepped through the gates of hell," LaVera said later. Indeed, she

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had lost her eyelashes, eyebrows and much of her hair and had suffered minor burns on her face and more serious ones on her arms, which she had thrown before her eyes. "Something exploded and—I thought I was killed, the heat was terrible. I fell backwards. My hands touched something and a baby cried and I grabbed at what I had touched and fell out through the flames already filling the back of the truck. It was terrible. Terrible. I could hear the screams."

LaVera regained consciousness in a hospital, where she stayed a week. To her great good fortune she was not scarred from the burns, except along the underside of her forearms. She knew she had been more than just fortunate. She had been a beautiful woman when she entered the fire. She remained so.

More, she was a mother. When she returned to the carnival, her mother, Monica de Monica, handed her a baby girl, carefully swathed in a Gypsy blanket.

"Who's is this?" LaVera demanded.

"Yours," her mother said simply.

"*Mine?*"

"You saved her from the fire. That makes her yours."

"But—what do I *do* with her?"

"What does anyone do with a child?"

"*I* can't raise her!"

"Then who will?"

Monica de Monica, that was who. LaVera did her best and tried hard at being a mother to the infant. In time she came to love the little girl. But, young, beautiful, much sought after by the men of the carnival, LaVera discouraged few and had little time for child rearing.

Monica de Monica assumed most of the responsibility for raising the child, for schooling her as best she could, and for teaching her what the older woman thought to be the most important lessons of her life: hatred of the people who had sold her—"people do not abandon their children!"—and the secret lore of the migrant peoples.

"One day they will pay for their crime," Monica told the young girl over and yet over again. "They shall be sought out and the most terrible of Gypsy curses placed upon them."

"Yes, grandmother," the little girl would reply dutifully. If her grandmother said something, then that was the way it would be.

"*That* is the way it will be," Doctor Dominoe said aloud to himself, shaking his high-domed head to clear it of the unpleasant memories. He

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moved on down the midway and out along the wide beach front walk, and as the sounds of the midway faded behind him, he began to feel a little better.

As Doctor Dominoe predicted, the people of the city came to them. Quite early in the sequence of events, Doctor Dominoe and Valencia gave up the "dancing doll" portion of the act, though he kept referring to her as such. She participated with him only as a mentalist, helping to gather in the "stick," the crowd.

Otherwise, in public and in private, she sat stiffly in her chair, staring vacant eyed, her skin the color of skimmed milk, hemp brown hair often matted and strung out in small ropes because of the dampness.

"The lady has a memento, Valencia. . ."

"A heart-shaped locket on a gold chain."

"The denomination of this particular silver coin?"

"A fifty-cent piece, dated 1923."

And amazed, the marks would draw closer.

Rapidly the reputation of the amazing Doctor Dominoe spread through the town. Valencia sat nearby, something more than a doll, something less than human, the object of much speculation, as was Doctor Dominoe himself.

"She's human, I tell you," Flotsam insisted to Jetsam one brassily warm afternoon. "A girl trained to act like a doll. Them jerky motions and such, the funny voice. Couldn't be no doll made to do them things."

"Yeah? Lissen. . .times I've walked by the Mar View where they have that room. I've saw her at the window. She don't move none, not none at all, never I tell you. Just sits there, staring out the window. And I talked to Mrs. Mullery. I tell you, Mrs. Mullery ain't *never* seen her. Ain't *never* heard her moving around. Only time she ever leaves that window is when Doctor Dominoe packs her in that trunk and hauls her around somewhere. You tell me that's a real person?"

"Strange, I gotta admit to that." And sitting on their seaside bench they fell silent as Doctor Dominoe strolled by. They followed him with watery, hostile eyes until he was out of sight.

"Whatta you suppose he does down there?"

"He goes out on the pier and watches waves for long times, they say. Don't talk to no one."

"Mighty strange."

And alone on the end of the pier Doctor Dominoe watched the ocean swells and wished he could erase certain conversations from his mind.

A picture of LaVera standing in frustrated puzzlement before

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her mother. "But why this terrible hatred on *your* part? What did the girl's parents ever do to *you*?"

"People do not abandon their children!" It was all she would ever say, but the fires of fury raging in her black eyes told LaVera there must be a secret reason for that hatred. One which the carefree LaVera did not want to know.

Doctor Dominoe shook away the unpleasant memories. He concentrated on the mission at hand. He could size up his mark with a single, all-encompassing glance, choose a standard opening line, and proceed to recite history and personal details as if he were reading from a meticulously compiled dossier. Which in a sense he was. The difference being that the marks supplied him with the necessary information as they went along.

Soon his reputation spread about the town to the point where he would accept "clients" for readings by appointment only. And only a few appointments each day. He wanted the lure to be as tempting as possible.

So the day Doctor Dominoe anticipated came quite soon. One afternoon he sat on the edge of the bed in the hotel room, the daily mail in his hands. Valencia faced the open window, staring blankly across the rooftops, a soft breeze soothing her. The mail contained the daily clamoring of people seeking a reading by Doctor Dominoe. He scrutinized the envelopes, and at the sight of one his face split wide in a huge grin. Monica de Monica had predicted that by the end of the second week the first letter would arrive if their plan was followed carefully. And so it had.

Doctor Dominoe flapped the envelope about in his long fingers without opening it, chortling softly to himself. The name and address on the upper left-hand corner told him all he really needed to know for the moment.

"Here it is, my dear. The first one. There will be, of course, a telephone number." He ripped open the letter, smiled in satisfaction, and tossed the remainder of the letters into a corner, unopened. "Gather in your strength, my dear. I hie myself to the telephone down the block. The first of the gross, colorless flies has come buzzing to our spider's web." A sound like the breaking of small bundles of sticks floated in the hall as he trod, bent almost double, down the low-ceilinged stairs.

Doctor Dominoe sat at a small round table, his knobby knees making bumps under the zodiac cloth. A single hand

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completely engulfed the crystal ball into which he pretended to peer.

"I see you carry a heavy burden," he said. From long practice the tone rolled along the hairline border between consultation and accusation. The woman across the table from him did not fail to notice the accusation and nervously rubbed the fingers of one hand against the others.

"I do have things on my mind," she admitted.

"Indeed." Doctor Dominoe lifted his piercing gaze from the crystal ball and studied the woman. More in proportion to the table, she huddled half fearfully, small, thin boned and light of weight. Cinnamon hair, carefully waved in the popular Marcel style, wrapped a thin face, once quite pretty, but pulled by years of guilt into an expression of perpetual dismay.

"Have you ever made any effort to find the child?" Doctor Dominoe demanded, fixing her with a stare so overwhelming that she squirmed like an insect on a thorn.

"You—you know about—"

"Doctor Dominoe knows all, sees all and tells all," he replied. He did not have to practice his cold reading to any great extent. He already knew a great deal about his intended victim. Much more than she could possibly imagine. For before him sat the natural mother of the little girl LaVera had snatched from the fire twenty years ago.

"There was nothing I could do! They forced me, they—"

She clamped a hand over her pale mouth. "Who—what are you?"

The corners of Doctor Dominoe's mouth lifted in a slight, humorless smile. "What, indeed? An agent shall we say. An agent of revenge come to suggest you ponder the evil of your ways."

The woman stared at him, her widening eyes and shallow breathing telling Doctor Dominoe of her fear. She swallowed hard and reached for a bluff to help restore her courage.

"You wouldn't dare harm me. People know I'm here. They know exactly where I am. You wouldn't dare lay a finger on me!"

Doctor Dominoe's own eyes widened in amazement. An expression of disbelief pulled his horse-long face into new lengths. "*I?* I harm you. My dear *woman. I* won't harm you in any way."

"You're planning to kill me." Hysteria had vanished from her voice now, and her tone fell flat on the table, like the clink of counterfeit coins.

"No. Not I. You came here to ask me to divine your future.

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That I have done. Would you care to hear of it?"

"No."

"Dear me. A shame. You seem to have wasted your twenty-five cents. But since your future is bleak, allow me to tell you what I know of your past.

"Your name is Irma Windsor. You are 38 years old, would be 39 in another two months."

"Would be?" Startled green eyes widened again.

"Do forgive me. You said you wished to know nothing of the future. Let us cast back, oh, say—20 years. You were seventeen, going on eighteen, really quite pretty in the fashion of the times."

Doctor Dominoe's voice rolled sonorously on, as rhythmic as the movement of surf on shore. He told her a story she already knew well. That of a young girl seduced by an older man, becoming his mistress, having his baby.

"You refused an abortion," Doctor Dominoe intoned. "Which may have been courageous of you. After all, the father-to-be was —is—a 'pillar of the community,' shall we say. But you resisted then such urgings as you had not been able to resist earlier. You had his baby, a girl, and lived in fear and seclusion, dreading the day of discovery.

"Then along came the Reverend Belmont, not as one might expect with recrimination, but with a solution. A couple in the carnival. Childless. *They* could be persuaded to take the child as their own.

"Do you wish to deny any of this?"

The pale, frightened woman shook her head negatively.

"Even the police became involved. A young sergeant—what was his name?" Doctor Dominoe pretended to cogitate and peered intently into the crystal ball. 'Name—name—"

"It was Sergeant Raymond Sandling," Irma Windsor offered tonelessly. "As if you didn't know."

Doctor Dominoe grinned toothily. "Ah, yes, Sergeant Sandling. An upstanding young man. Chief of Police of Oceana now. He has come a long way in twenty years. With the help of a certain citizen, of course."

"Who are you? What do you want?" Irma Windsor demanded.

Doctor Dominoe hesitated. He recognized her courage was returning. Whatever he was to do, he would have to move swiftly now.

"There is an old Gypsy curse. . .," Doctor Dominoe began, peering intently at his victim. The tiny spark of fire which had appeared in the woman's manner flickered and

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died under that scrutiny. He almost allowed himself to smile.

But for some reason the words did not roll from his tongue, practiced though he was in the lengthy incantation. Though the words boiled in his mind, something held him back. Irma Windsor was no true enemy of his, no menace to him. She was, more than anything, a victim of a crime, not a criminal.

Doctor Dominoe stood suddenly, thrusting his chair behind him. He towered over the woman, frowning, undecided. All those years, all the planning, the scheming, the unimaginable effort which kept him functioning, and now he could not bring himself to complete his mission.

But Irma Windsor misunderstood Doctor Dominoe's quick move. She screamed, a piercing wail which assaulted Doctor Dominoe's ears and disconcerted him even more.

"My dear woman," he said, reaching around the table toward her.

"No. No! Keep away from me!" She pushed against the table and finding herself able, scrambled away and out the door. Doctor Dominoe hurried after her at an awkward but distance-devouring lope. She had to be stopped. She could ruin everything. He had to talk to her.

She ran down the midway, nearly blinded by fear, looking behind her only to see Doctor Dominoe drawing closer.

Few people were out, and many of the concessions had closed early. The carrousel ground away at its weary circle. A scattering of teenagers wandered aimlessly in the penny arcade. And one couple strolled to the admission gate of the brilliantly lighted roller coaster.

The couple paid their admission and took their seats at the rear of the train of cars. The operator, not even hoping for more customers, started the train up the lengthy first incline. Alone, he was not watching the gate when Irma Windsor appeared there suddenly, scrambled under the turnstile, and ran along the loading platform.

"Stop that woman!" Doctor Dominoe called, pushing futilely against the locked turnstile.

"Hey, lady, you can't—"

Doctor Dominoe stepped over the turnstile, and the bewildered operator turned an angry and questioning look upon him.

"Stop her!"

"What's going on here?" the operator demanded. "You can't come busting in here like this."

"I fear we already have," Doctor Dominoe said, a solemn gaze lifting higher and higher

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above the operator's head. "And if we don't stop that woman, there may be a serious accident."

Already Irma Windsor was halfway up the incline, crawling in panic along the catwalk beside the rails, moving even faster than the train of cars. The only way to stop her would be to follow her. And that, Doctor Dominoe knew, would serve only to frighten her more.

"Whatsa matter with that broad?"

"She seems to be deranged."

"She's crazy as a loon, too. She falls offa there, it'll kill her. We'll have a helluva mess here."

I wonder why they always head for high places? Doctor Dominoe thought to himself, watching the frantic woman. Up, up, they want always to go up.

Panicked, Irma actually reached the top of the Cyclone Racer before the cars did. The couple shot her one startled look before the cars nosed over the incline and down the steep straightway, rumbling like a freight train.

Irma stood alone at the top, staring wildly about for something to hold on to. There was nothing. She was on the highest part of the structure, more than ten stories above the pier on which it was built.

The train plunged down the straightaway, its female passenger screaming in accepted fashion. The cars slowed at the top of the first curve, snaked on around and down again, and the entire frame rattled and swayed with the passing of the heavy cars.

Doctor Dominoe watched her fall. Had she lain down on the tracks until the cars had coasted to their stop, she might have been all right. But she stood instead, a tiny figure outlined by floodlamps against a dark and starless sky.

She fell, shaken loose from her precarious and vibrating perch. Thirty feet below she bounced once along some tracks, then plummeted to the floor of the pier. Her screams could have been those of the woman in the coaster train, but Doctor Dominoe knew they were not. And he heard the peculiar thud as the thin body hit the heavy timbers of the pier.

Doctor Dominoe hurried toward the shattered form, picking his way through a maze of pillars and trestles. The operator had to wait to brake the train at the end of the run, and so Doctor Dominoe stood peering down at the bloody remains when he came running up to the point of impact.

"Now, ain't *that* a hell of a mess?" the operator demanded.

Doctor Dominoe declined comment. He turned slowly

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away. Well. It was not exactly as they had planned it. In fact, it was not the way they had planned it at all. But he knew that Monica de Monica would have been pleased. Exceedingly pleased. He could picture the old woman now, chortling happily in her grave.

One down, so to speak. Three to go.

Doctor Dominoe sat on the edge of the brass bed in the Hotel Mar View, hands folded, stringy black hair fallen from the top of his head and over his brows. Facing him, still in her huge chair but turned away from the window now, Valencia's blank eyes mirrored the gaunt man's weary face.

"Counsel, Valencia, counsel. I dislike spending your strength, but I must be certain you know exactly what I say."

Doctor Dominoe watched as Valencia's empty blue eyes slowly filled in with color and life, as if someone were pouring smoky fluid into a vessel. After a few moments the eyes, bright and shining now, followed his every change of expression. Nothing else about her moved.

"The woman is dead, Valencia. Dead in a horrible accident. A result, I have no doubt, of my confrontation. Oh—it was I who weakened first. I was actually unable to deliver Monica's frightful curse. And still the woman died."

"What shall we do, Valencia? Abandon this wild and evil plan of Monica's? Return whence we came? Or go on?"

The tiny voice sounded as if it came from far away. "We shall go on, Doctor Dominoe. It was Monica's dying wish."

"*And* her only living one, apparently," Doctor Dominoe murmured.

"Monica was abandoned by her own parents. She suffered a frightful childhood and never forgave them—or anyone else who did such a thing."

"I didn't know that."

"Even you can't know everything. But remember—your promise. My promise. We shall go on."

"Yes, Valencia."

The swirling, smoky color faded slowly from Valencia's eyes, the brightness dimmed. Soon she stared silently from blank eyes, unseeing again. Gently, Doctor Dominoe moved her to face the window.

"Very well, then. And may God rest their souls."

Perhaps Doctor Dominoe's reference to God, unaccustomed and lying rather heavily on his tongue even as he said it, proved even more prophetic than he had imagined. For by request, his next reading was scheduled for the rectory of the First Church of the World of Religious Science.

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The Reverend Mister Belmont sat behind his desk, employing it as something of a barrier between himself and the world of evil beyond. He sat hunched forward, resting his arms heavily on the polished walnut as if to keep the massive piece of furniture from lifting away to heaven out of sheer piety. The room itself stank of piety, of candles and musty old books, and the close air of many a consultation behind closed doors. And of another smell which Doctor Dominoe did not recognize at first.

Doctor Dominoe wrinkled his nose in distaste—only once, there being no merit in being rude just now—and wondered what the sickening fraud had to be so superior about. For the reverend wore a mouse face, complete to pointed nose, beady black eyes, and pale, wispy mustache. He also displayed mousy mannerisms, reminding Doctor Dominoe of nothing so much as a tiny rodent manipulating a piece of cheese between pink paws. Or a rat grown fat and bloated on the garbage of other people's legitimate worldly fears.

In the austerity of Belmont's study, Doctor Dominoe did not employ any of his props. Those were for a different kind of mark. This one would surely offer more of a challenge than the unfortunate woman. This was a man of intelligence, at least, and guided by a ruthlessness of his own perhaps as powerful as Doctor Dominoe's.

"I see you carry a heavy burden," Doctor Dominoe said by way of opening, once the amenities had been observed. He attempted to fix the minister with his piercing stare, but the beady black eyes caught the implication like a lance tip and deflected it.

"We all carry heavy burdens, Brother Dominoe. All of us are beset with guilt and sin and only by delivering ourselves to the power and the glory of the Lord can we be free of them."

"Indeed," Doctor Dominoe murmured. He had been invited there to speak to the Reverend Belmont. Even now the letter asking for an appointment crinkled dryly in his coat pocket. He had expected the challenge. He might also have anticipated a religious lecture. "Some of us, however," Doctor Dominoe continued before Reverend Belmont could fire up his rhetoric, "carry heavier ones than do others. Such as the unfortunate woman—what *was* her name?" He touched a long white finger to his head, pretending to think.

"Ah, yes, poor Miss Windsor, our dear departed sister."

"Windsor, yes, indeed. The name had escaped me momentarily."

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Belmont's mousy whiskers twitched. "I understand she had been to see you just before her—untimely death."

"True, true. She seemed to misinterpret my function as a seer. When I was unable to help her with her problem, she lost all control. I could not stop her. The rest you know."

Belmont did not answer, but peered guardedly from button eyes.

"It was a problem I would have thought *you* more capable of handling," Doctor Dominoe continued. "One with which you—ah—assisted her once before."

Doctor Dominoe could detect the onset of fear—or perhaps apprehension—as it brightened in Belmont's rat-like eyes. He was on his way.

"It was the matter of the child. She wanted to know what I could tell her of the girl. What, through my mystic powers, I could learn of the child's whereabouts."

"The girl," Belmont echoed emptily.

"Yes, the infant you urged her to abandon to the couple in the traveling carnival." Doctor Dominoe made a steeple of his long fingers and peered over the top of it.

"How—how do you know about that?" Belmont demanded, fear again flickering in his eyes.

"Doctor Dominoe sees all, knows all and tells all," came the sonorous reply.

"Who else have you told about this—this supposed child?"

"Let me say only that there are others who know. A certain newspaper, for example, has been delivered a file on the matter. Names, dates, places. You figure prominently. Except for your—intervention—Miss Windsor might have kept the child."

"That is exactly what we didn't want!" Belmont growled.

"That," Doctor Dominoe said, "is precisely what the bewildered young woman *did* want. She loved the child and wanted to keep her. But of course in that event the name of the father would surely have become known. Is that not so?"

Doctor Dominoe had been fishing in deep water with that line, but in Belmont's subtle changes of expression, the slight droop of the mustache, he read acceptance.

"The father," Doctor Dominoe continued, "was a man of some—ah—prominence in the community. Not to mention husband and father to three legitimate children. You—you were a struggling young minister with, shall we say, more ambition than means. Poor, struggling in a storefront church, going nowhere.

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"Miss Windsor was one of your small congregation. You had influence upon her. You persuaded her to abandon the child. Shortly thereafter a substantial, anonymous donation was made to your church. You moved into a better building. A more affluent congregation gathered. The church—and you—prospered. A capsule history. But quite accurate, I am sure."

"What sort of man are you?" Belmont demanded, the fearful eyes blazing now. "How do you know these things?"

"I am a seer. In your future I see only tragedy. I see, for example, that your drinking habits have long been, shall we say, immoderate."

"Damn you!" Belmont shouted. Almost automatically he reached into the bottom drawer of his desk and drew out a bottle and water glass. He set the glass into a pattern of rings which Doctor Dominoe had earlier noticed on the desk top and splashed several ounces of whiskey into it. This he drank straight down. As he set the glass back on the desk, beside the half empty bottle, his hands trembled so that he could barely perform that simple task.

"I see also that you are ill. The color of your skin, the sometimes uncontrollable shaking of your hands. You are a sick man, Reverend Belmont. But you have not consulted a physician, because you know what the diagnosis will be.

"One day soon you will collapse. Perhaps tonight," he added as Belmont splashed more liquor into the glass. "And within hours of that collapse you will be dead."

"It's true, it's all true," Belmont admitted, his mustache drooping even more, his face sagging into patterns of despair. "I don't know how, but you seem to know everything. That is what they all say, that you know everything. You made only one mistake. I have been to a doctor. Six weeks ago he told me that if I stopped drinking immediately I might live another month." He laughed hollowly. "See? What does he know? I didn't quit drinking and I'm already two weeks ahead.

"But I feel the hands of death on my shoulder, Brother Dominoe. Soon enough I will have to answer to Him for that one terrible sin."

Doctor Dominoe studied the now-shrunken little man with unpitying eyes. For twenty years he had carried his terrible secret in his heart while spouting pieties from his mouth. And for twenty years he had paid. The final payment soon would come due. In days at most, perhaps in hours. The

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hands of death indeed lay on his shoulder.

Doctor Dominoe rose. Again he had not completed his mission. Again some more powerful force was robbing him of his game.

"I leave you to your thoughts, Reverend," Doctor Dominoe said. "No need to guide me out. I can see quite well in the dark." And so saying he moved on into the night.

Later that same night Doctor Dominoe stood in the home of Freyburg Hamilton Perrine III. Doctor Dominoe found the living room remarkable in several ways. First, a huge bay window overlooked the city of Oceana, and the view danced away down gentle slopes to the sea. Second, it was huge, larger than any house Doctor Dominoe had ever been in, much less a single room. Third, it boasted a sweeping spiral staircase, wide enough at the bottom for six people to stand side by side. And last, from a balustrade near the top of the stairs dangled Perrine's body, a silk sash knotted around his throat.

Doctor Dominoe, who had let himself in through the French window, decided to leave the same way. There had been much of intuition which had led him to the window for entry. The same suggested the exit. Having arrived silently and he hoped unseen, he departed the same way, lost in thought as deep as the puzzle before him.

Wind whipped the thin curtain before the open window of Doctor Dominoe's hotel room as he placed Valencia carefully in the trunk. He frowned at the scent of a new storm. Didn't the weather ever settle down in this Godforsaken place?

"Yet another storm, my dear. This a natural one in addition to the other we shall face. I managed to elude the good Chief Sandling's little embarrassment tonight. But now he will come looking for me. I will need you to help as best we can.

"This time we face no hysterical woman or sniveling alcoholic. Raymond Sandling is a ruthless, a dangerous man. He knows he is next on the now obvious list. He will not wait to be hunted down.

"I think it appropriate that he find us—in the Chamber of Horrors. Don't you agree?" And Doctor Dominoe's rasping chuckle filled the room.

He carried the steamer trunk down the narrow stairs and loaded it on the iron-wheeled wagon for what he knew would be the last haul down the midway.

"I'll miss you, Valencia. I hope you will miss me, as well.

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A pity we can't continue our relationship. But no doubt you long to be free."

The only other person to see Doctor Dominoe was the old man he had tabbed "Jetsam." Jetsam, alone for a change and sleepless, had been walking the deserted midway. He had taken refuge from the wind by crouching in the doorway of the salt water taffy stand, and so remained unnoticed. He decided to follow along, keeping to deepest shadows.

It proved to be a simple task, as Doctor Dominoe plodded straight into the wind, pulling the rattling and grinding car without looking backwards.

A clock on the Cyclone Racer gleamed luminescent green as Doctor Dominoe approached the Chamber of Horrors, and he noted it was just half past three. He also noted that he appeared to be alone on the midway. He nodded in satisfaction. Soon enough there would be another.

Doctor Dominoe let himself into the Chamber of Horrors through a service door with one of a large number of keys he had secured. He left the wagon and empty trunk under the bunting-decked stage outside. After this night neither trunk nor wagon would be needed again. He cradled Valencia in his long arms, her frizzly head resting on his bony shoulder.

The tall man walked wearily but surely through the first series of exhibits, past the hanging man, through the Torture Dungeons, and finally to Madame DeLessep's Wax Works. He found his way quite well in total darkness.

He stumbled once, but only because a thunderclap exploded outside, sending shattering shock waves rattling and roaring through the flimsy building. Moments later rain hammered on the corrugated iron roof, drumming in a fury exceeded only by the howling wind.

Doctor Dominoe found a chair and sat Valencia carefully in it. From a nearby service area he produced a damp cloth and, one last time, gently sponged her face and arms. He smiled as he worked, soothing and cooling her hot skin, and within his dome-like skull there burned an emotion he did not understand. He wondered if it was what men called love.

Well! Why not? And he combed her rope-end hair as best he could, loosened the shoe buckles on her swollen feet, and arranged her hands carefully in her lap.

"I think you had best be present, Valencia. Doctor Dominoe, who sees all and knows all, foresees a sorry end to tonight's last act." He watched as smoky liquid filled her eyes, and a flush of color

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moved into her cheeks. "Save your strength. Just be near. I feel our quarry approaching. He will need light."

Doctor Dominoe moved behind a false wall to a panel of switches which fed light and power to the various exhibits. He closed them all, and lights began to glow, and electric motors waited further command. Lastly he lighted the gas fire under the huge pot of wax upon the raised platform bearing a frightful scene: Madame DeLesseps carefully coating a human skeleton with wax, preparing one of her ultrarealistic creations.

A thorough and realistic man, the proprietor of the Chamber of Horrors. The wax really boiled during exhibition hours. It smelled and looked much more realistic that way.

Every other aspect of the Chamber of Horrors was true to life—or death—as well. Except possibly the hanging man, who moldered and stank entirely too unpleasantly to be genuine. And the grave robbers tableau. That could not be a *real* corpse the figures were exhuming. Could it?

Oh, it was quite realistic. The Iron Maiden in the Hall of Tortures had been authenticated. As had the rack and wheel. The place was a veritable museum.

The Wax Works reigned as the undisputed masterpiece of all. It depicted the works of a mad and disheveled Madame DeLesseps, working her creations out of the remains of human victims, assisted by troll-like workers with hideous cutting and sawing tools—quite real ones.

A thorough man, the proprietor of the Chamber of Horrors. It was recognized as the best in the country.

Such thoughts passed briefly through Doctor Dominoe's head as he waited. But soon enough he heard the wailing laugh of Dracula greeting a visitor, followed by the screeching of a coffin lid as a skeleton rose to see who was disturbing his rest. Frankenstein's monster roared once, and assorted laughs and groans and shrieks filled the cave-like rooms of the Chamber. Raymond Sandling had found his quarry and moved confidently toward them.

Valencia sat in her chair, unmoving, only her eyes now showing signs of life. Doctor Dominoe stood near the pot of boiling wax, ostensibly warming his hands. Overhead rain drummed steadily on the iron roof.

Sound effects indicated Raymond Sandling's approach, and soon he stood before them, a bulky man, dwarfed by Doctor Dominoe's height, but obvious-

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ly carrying many more pounds on his wide frame.

Sandling stopped at the far end of the Wax Works tableau, rain dripping from his grey slicker and wide-brimmed hat.

"Good evening, Chief," Doctor Dominoe said cheerily.

Sandling said nothing. He stood with legs spread apart, eyes moving swiftly from figure to figure in the tableau as if to be sure they were not alive and a menace. His glance passed quickly over Valencia and locked in finally on Doctor Dominoe's calm gaze.

"I see you had no difficulty finding us when we were not at our usual—ah—shop," Doctor Dominoe said, breaking the silence again.

Again Sandling said nothing, but moved toward Doctor Dominoe, stepped carefully around figures of dwarfs and over scattered knives, axes and saws and representations of human parts placed artfully around on the floor. He stopped with his back to the main group of blood-stained butchers.

Doctor Dominoe smiled. "Ah, if they could come to life—would they fall upon me? Or you?" he said, gesturing toward the frightful scene.

"You're a wise bastard, aren't you?" Sandling spoke at last. He stood poised warily, hand near his gun.

"Wisdom is a gift of the gods. If I have been fortunate. . ." He gestured self-deprecatingly.

"A real wise bastard."

"Wise enough, at least, to avoid your little—trap at the Perrine home. I am not certain just what you hoped to accomplish there. But then, this is a small, unsophisticated town. Undoubtedly, just my presence at the death scene would have been excuse enough for you to—eliminate me. *Who* would question the word or *judgment of the chief of police* himself?"

"Who, indeed?" Sandling said, smiling grimly now.

Doctor Dominoe nodded. "I reconstruct Perrine's death something like this: After I left the Reverend Belmont, that worthy man called Perrine. He warned him that the top was about to blow off. That I had given the entire story to the big city newspapers—with documentation. That the scandal would, of course, ruin everyone—including himself, such as was left to ruin.

"Perrine called you in whining panic, if I understand that gentleman's character. You went immediately to his home. There was an argument, a brief fight; you killed Perrine, perhaps with a single outraged blow of your obviously powerful arm. An unfortunate ac-

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cident. But not without its own rewards. Perrine, at least, was out of the way. Aside from the dying Belmont, no one is left alive who knows of your part in the—ah—illegal disposition of the child some twenty years ago.

"You hung the body from a balustrade to make it look like suicide. Nor would the coroner gainsay you. I was then invited to the house. Merely, as I imagine, to place me at the scene. I went, because of course Perrine was on my—list. If circumstances permitted, of course, you could shift the entire burden onto me. *I* could have as easily killed Perrine. And Belmont would no doubt sign a deposition to the effect that I had motive. Am I correct?"

"Uncannily so," Sandling agreed. "Who are you. What are you doing here? Have you actually been hounding us down because of that incident twenty years ago?"

"That was the intention. To date, however, fate has taken all punishment out of our hands. Now their remains only you."

"And there is going to remain only me," Sandling said, snarling and spitting the words as suddenly as a cat cornered by a dog. From beneath his coat he produced a long-barreled .38 revolver. He leveled the sights directly at the towering figure of the man in the polka dot frock coat.

Three shots roared from the muzzle and echoes of the explosion bounced around the Chamber of Horrors like thunder. The three slugs caught Doctor Dominoe chest high and knocked him backwards. He staggered several steps, but a hand found the nearby wall and he remained standing.

Aiming carefully again, Sandling fired twice more, each shot thudding into Doctor Dominoe's chest, staggering him. Still he did not fall, but stood staring silently at the policeman.

To Sandling's right Valencia rose stiffly from her chair. "Do you think you can harm him *that* way?" she demanded in a low, soft voice.

Raymond Sandling then made the first and last serious mistake of his life. Startled to see the apparently lifeless doll suddenly walking toward him, talking, he took a single step backward as he turned the gun toward her.

His left foot stepped on a wooden arm, cleverly painted to resemble human flesh. The arm rolled. Sandling lost his balance and fell backwards on the needle end of a huge carving knife held by a troll figure. His gun fired one last time, and the bullet slammed through the iron roof above.

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The policeman dangled briefly, screaming, the knife point sticking through his chest; then he and the figure crashed to the floor in a pool of quite real blood. From above rain water dripped through the bullet hole, splattering on the dead man's outstretched hand and gun.

Doctor Dominoe walked slowly over to the pair as Valencia stood mute and watchful. He examined the man briefly.

"He's dead."

"What shall we do with him?"

Doctor Dominoe laughed. "Leave him there, of course. It will be an interesting exhibit for the first visitors tomorrow."

"Then it is over. And I shall have to leave you here, too," Valencia said sadly.

"I know. But—" Again Doctor Dominoe chuckled, his tombstone sense of humor not to be denied. "My, won't it give them all something to talk about?"

"Three dead, one dying. But not by our hands after all, Doctor Dominoe."

"Monica would be just as well pleased."

"I have no doubt. And that releases me, once and for all, from my vow to her." As Doctor Dominoe nodded in silent agreement, she grasped her rope-like hair in one hand and tugged gently. The frizzled wig came off easily, revealing her own natural long hair glowing with the color and texture of corn silk. She allowed the hair to fall around her shoulders. From a bag they had brought she removed a simply cut dress, silk stockings, and high-heeled shoes.

She changed into the clothes, first removing a constricting band of cloth from around full, round breasts. In the dim light she expertly applied make-up to cheeks and lips.

Valencia, the dancing doll, vanished forever with the discard of the child's clothing she had worn. In her place stood a new Valencia, a twenty-year-old woman, unquestionably beautiful, as unquestionably in control now.

She turned to the tall thin man now sitting in the chair she had vacated. "It is time to say good-by now, Doctor Dominoe. I'm really quite sorry."

"It has been a long and weary road, Valencia, though traveled diligently to its winding end. I know it has been unbelievably difficult, and many times have I marveled at your stamina."

"Monica taught me well that the powers are there for those who would use them." She walked to the tall strange man and for a moment held his huge bony hands in her own soft

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ones. "I could never have done it alone. As Monica said, they had to come to us."

Doctor Dominoe smiled, only a lowering of the corners of his eyes betraying sadness. "I shall always be right there, should you need me again."

"I know. Thank you, Doctor Dominoe. We may yet travel together again."

"Good-by, Valencia."

Valencia stepped back and pressed her hands lightly to her eyes. Concentrating intensely, she drew Doctor Dominoe's life forces back within herself from whence they originally had come.

The tall figure shrank in on itself. Deep melancholy swept Valencia as the huge head, the butterfly hands shrank, wrinkled and finally disappeared entirely in wisps of dust. The stovepipe hat fell to the floor and rolled out of sight. The polka dot frock coat fell in around itself, and long pants legs sagged emptily.

Valencia took a single deep breath, resolutely turned her back, and walked bareheaded and unprotected into the rain.

As she stepped out the door, Jetsam, overcome by curiosity, made the final turn to the Wax Works tableau. Stepping carefully from long experience around the various trips which activated the exhibits and sound effects, he arrived silently.

Dispassionately he examined the bloody corpse of Raymond Sandling, deciding wisely, he felt, not to touch it. He was much more interested anyway in the clothing worn by Doctor Dominoe. The Doctor himself was nowhere in sight. Inside the coat and shirt a single bulky bag sagged tiredly, leaking small rivulets of sawdust from five holes punched in the coarse fabric.

Jetsam came to a conclusion: Get out and say nothing to no one. "Nobody'd believe me, anyway," he said to himself as he hurried away. He emerged into the rain behind Valencia who, walking determinedly, already strode well ahead of him in the dark.

She did not use her powers to keep the rain away. It would have taken too much strength, and she was exhausted by the long ordeal.

But she walked lightly, freedom lending springs to her feet. Free. Her own woman now. With the world before her. She laughed once lightly, just to see what it was like. The sound floated from her lips.

She found it good.

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This superior story is about, among many other things, the process of creativity. As an interesting sidelight, Mr. Moffitt tells us that the technology described is now a reality, in the form of a medical-electronic device that uses ultrasonic waves and a computer to produce a visual image of the interior of the body. "You can take a 'Fantastic Voyage' tour through your own kidneys, liver, intestine (or musculature, as in the story) in full color and at any magnification. As a bonus, the doctor can press a button and get a holograph which lets him see his patients' insides in three dimensions!"

The Man Who Was Beethoven

by DONALD MOFFITT

MIKE BEATTY WAS IN THE middle of the funeral march from the Eroica—that place in the fugal section where the third horn lifts up with supernatural clarity before the violins claw their way back to the minor—when the whole world fell apart. Or came together.

It was precisely like awakening from a dream. One of those dreams with all of those uncanny convincing details that gradually, in the minute or so that you're fighting consciousness, cease to make sense.

It was an ordinary Friday evening for Mike. Bianca had come over right after work to cook dinner for them both. It was a good one, too, arroz con pollo and a chilled, slightly edgy Chablis and an avocado salad with lemon juice and vinegar that he could still taste in the recesses of his mouth, and there had been two perfect clean icy martinis first. And neither of them was in any hurry, and they curled up companionably on the overstuffed corduroy couch and lit up, and Mike turned up the hi fi.

The stack began with Bach, the concerto for two violins, spidery weavings in a universe that did not admit of brass or woodwinds, and went on

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through *Kinderszenen*, all glitter and interesting notions and no framework to worry about, and topped off with the Eroica so that he could flip the stack and hear it consecutively and then let them down easy through the Schumann and Bach again.

He never knew how much Bianca understood or felt, but she listened quietly and nodded and smiled encouragingly when he pointed things out, even when he got carried away and started to sound incoherent, but what the hell, we're all prisoners in our own skulls, right? and the important thing is to keep sending and receiving signals, and besides, what did Bianca get out of it when she ran on about flowers and animals and her combative encounters of the day and her cousins, and he listened and nodded and made comments and gave the required advice?

There it was, and he was floating, and it wasn't just the gin or the wine or the pot, it was the moving masses and chiseled edges of the Beethoven, sounds that were sensed almost as if they had shape and texture and positions in space. The massive dangerous weight of the C minor section had settled safely into place, though the ledge it was poised on would itself begin to shift after the fugal interlude and send it toward a new equilibrium. Now the strong ropy line of the first voice began questing inexorably upward, braced underneath by a countervoice made of bassoon and violas, and together they made a structure, like a steel frame that won't stand up until its separate parts are riveted together at an angle, and now another member was firmly in place with its own countersubject, and they started to enclose a space that made a supernal, awesome shape; and here was the third horn, bold and full, dragging the music into the major, almost unbearable—

And there was something wrong. Mike shook his head. If it went on growing in this direction, it was going to topple over. Sweat started on his brow. Quick. he'd have to add a counterweight here—an inversion of the theme played by trombones—but wait a minute, there were no trombones in the score! Do it with cellos and bassoons—a seventh in the bass so that it could move down a half step to the third of a new temporary tonic chord, while the upper part of the structure wrested itself into a new position up a fourth—

No, that wasn't right either! A dead end. It would kill all the forward motion. He should—

It was all wrong again. Mike wrinkled his brow, confused. What was wrong about it? Of

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course! *He* wasn't supposed to rearrange things, build the sound. It already had been built almost two hundred years ago by a man named Beethoven. It existed. He was just supposed to observe it, experience it. All he had to do was find his way toward it again—

But that was wrong, too. There it was anyway, the seventh in the bass, all honey smooth cellos and bassoons, and it was moving down that half step. Mike could no longer hear music. It was all physical work now, feeling the shapes and textures, and he tugged at the elastic line of the violins, and it didn't have to come to a dead end at the fourth; he could move the violas to E natural and make an augmented which would collapse immediately into a congenial slope that would—

The tottering structure of the Eroica was whirling away into deep space, a tiny clinging figure of himself tugging and pushing at its parts. He flung his hands out after it, and his arms went through Bianca and the couch, as if she were a sunbeam, a projection, and, yes, there was the weave of her blouse on his forearm, complete with a row of rippling buttons that moved across his sleeve as his arm continued to go through her. But he couldn't feel her; she continued to smile at him in a faded way, and she was getting dimmer and dimmer, and the music was gone now, and—

—And he was lying on his back somehow, nude, and he had a muzzy hungover kind of feeling. The surface he was lying on was soft, warm and yielding. There was the soft whisper of a pump and a background rustle of clicking relays. He raised his hand to his head and dozens of small wires pulled loose from his arm, and there were more contacts pasted to his shaved head, and one of them hurt because he seemed to have broken off a fine wire that was embedded in his scalp.

He sat up and more contacts pulled loose, all over his upper body. He was blind, but that was because there were little cups over his eyelids. He pulled gingerly at them, and they came away with a soft pop, and he could see. He was surrounded by glittering lenses and things that looked like recessed diaphragms on jointed stalks, and tiny glittering scraps of foil that shivered on their stems like leaves every time he moved. The surface he was on seemed to have millions of tiny projections, like the pile of a rug, and the whole platform itself jiggled like the platform of a scale.

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There was a girl in a green smock perched on a stool next to him. She looked distressed.

"What a shame," she said. "That was a good one." Her finger stabbed at a button on the console in front of her.

A door grew like an iris on the blank wall. Two men in green smocks stepped through, and the door winked shut again. They were both big and purposeful, with muscular hairy forearms.

"I tried to keep him under, but it was no use," the girl said.

"You should have called us sooner," one of the men said.

Mike said, "Hey, just a minute. . ."

"There wasn't time," the girl said. "It all happened in just a couple of seconds."

Mike was trying to get off the jiggling platform, but he felt weak and dizzy. One of the men stepped quickly to his side and put a pair of strong meaty hands on his shoulders. He smelled of soap and antiseptic.

"Just take it easy, fella," he said. He tried to push Mike down again.

The other man said, "I don't think it's going to be any use now. Let's give up on this one and send him through recupe, exercise him, rebalance the electrolytes in his system. . ."

"It was such a good one," the girl said. "Maybe if we put him under again. . ."

"No, it never works."

Mike was struggling feebly. The man stopped trying to push him down and let him swing his legs over the edge. Mike was shocked to see how thin and pale they were. The burly man was supporting him now.

"The muscle tone's practically gone," the other man said. "That's why he ran into trouble on that last sequence."

"We were so close," the girl said. "Another five seconds, maybe six, and he would have finished the movement. It only had another four or five minutes to run."

"You can't win 'em all," the man said.

"What's this all about?" Mike said. "What are you people doing to me?"

"Just relax," said the girl.

"Relax, hell!" Mike said. "Listen you, if you don't. . ."

The burly man gave Mike an open-handed slap that made his head snap back. "Watch the way you talk to a Grade Four Tech, fella!" he said.

The girl looked displeased. "Graley, that was entirely unnecessary. It isn't as if they know anything. You might as well kick one of the holograph recorders or slap the REM camera."

"Besides," the other man said, "you might damage him, and then there'd be all those forms to fill out."

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"I think they know more than they let on," Graley grumbled. He helped Mike roughly off the table, and the two men began walking him toward the iris in the wall. The girl followed.

"Where's Bianca?" Mike said. "What is this place?"

"There's no Bianca," the other man said.

"Shh!" the girl warned.

"You know it doesn't matter," the man said. "He won't remember anything anyway, once he gets started on a new sequence. Anything that doesn't fit in, anyway."

"I can't help feeling that he—well, it just makes me uncomfortable, that's all," the girl said.

"You know Hollister's right," said Graley. "Who cares anyway, the creeps. They make me nervous."

"Bianca was sitting right next to me," Mike said, and immediately felt silly. Hollister was right. There was no Bianca.

"You'll feel better soon," Hollister said. "Get some solid food into you. But take it easy at first."

"And a massage, and some exercise," the girl said brightly. "And maybe sex, if you feel up to it in a day or so."

"Then back to the old salt mines," Graley laughed unpleasantly.

Bianca wasn't real, or the hi fi, or the apartment or the dinner he'd had. There never had been a world like that. There couldn't be. It didn't make sense. A fairy tale world with different countries where people spoke different languages, and only three billion people in it, and where people were allowed to live alone in apartments, and those funny straight-sided houses, and leaves that were green instead of pink, and a sky with only one sun. He shook his head wonderingly; he'd come up with a lulu this time.

"Look, he's smiling," the girl said.

"Things looking better, fella?" Hollister said.

It was all coming back. "Tell me," Mike said, "was there ever an Einstein?"

Hollister furrowed his forehead. "Einstein. . .sure. Physicist. Big strapping fellow with blond hair and a crew cut. Thought up the theory of relativity. Died at the age of thirty in a skimmer crash. Way back, couple of hundred years ago."

Mike smiled again. His subconscious had transformed some of the details, but he'd got most of it right. It was Einstein's research in psychology, after he'd given up the dead end of physics and relativity at the age of twenty-six, that had started it

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all. Einstein had analyzed his own creative processes, realized he didn't think in words or numbers or diagrams, but daydreamed shapes and masses that moved mysteriously in a vast space. He fitted the shapes together like a jigsaw puzzle, never vocalizing the concepts, until they felt somehow right. The equations and words came afterward. Other scientists and artists were analyzed. They too visualized images, strained against imaginary resistance, balanced weights. That's the way creativity worked—on a primitive level where all your muscles and tendons and glands strived against obstacles, in an analogue of reality. It was a memory of two billion years of evolution: the one-celled creature pushing through fluid in search of food; the primate balanced, asleep, on a limb; the hurled rock; the grasped stick.

The computers took the input from eye-movement detectors, and springs and coils, and blood samples, and the electrical resistance of his skin, and internal holographs of every muscle in his body, and put it all together. Interpreting the results was a high-level job. It took a Grade Eight Tech.

Dreaming was easy.

"I still think we ought to pursue the one he was having before he woke up. Some of the dial readings were fantastic."

There never had been a Beethoven.

"You're being silly, and you know it," Hollister said. "We'll start fresh in a few days. We can't afford any blind alleys. We're behind on our quota this month."

"Yeah," Graley said. "Remember the team in the art section that had to throw away a whole week's production when one of their Sleepies came up with this crazy idea of perspective, where he made things smaller to show they were further away?" He looked meaningfully at the girl. "The tech on watch let it go on too long. I guess she figured it might have some novelty appeal, but all that happened was it gave you a headache trying to look at it."

You needed dreamers, though. At least it gave society a reason to keep him alive. Mike shivered, remembering that first interview he'd had at the age of eight. And the week of tests and trials. He wasn't supposed to know what would happen if he failed. But he'd known all the same.

"What do you suggest for next time?" the man called Hollister asked the girl.

Mike took a deep precious breath. He was as necessary as the machines and the detectors and the computers and even—he flung the thought defiantly—the

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Grade Eight Techs.

After all, where else were they going to get their music and their art and their poetry and their theories and relativity?

"Well," the girl said, "he had a flash of something he called Bach. He subvocalized the name very plainly. It might be interesting." She sounded doubtful. "Seemed to be a development of the thing he was doing just before he woke up, and he planted it as a pseudomemory to fit further back."

Mike could remember the Bach vaguely. It was a different kind of music, a kind that nobody had heard yet, with separate lines of melody that intertwined somewhat like that —what had he called it?—fugal section from the Beethoven. Only more austere and strict, with just one tone color and no extra notes to fill in the harmony. He tried to hum some, but went off key.

"I don't know," Graley said. "I was looking at the monitor board. "Looked kind of dull."

"Shall we give it a try anyway?"

"No, who needs it?"

"Okay, no Bach," the other man said. The iris parted and they dragged Mike through into reality.

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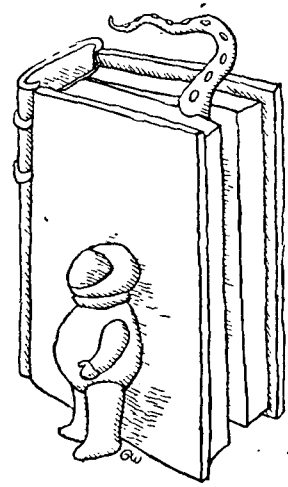
WE ALL KNOW THAT REASON is superior to Emotion. (After all, look where it's got us.) And that souls ride inside bodies, like people inside Edsels, right? And that Edsels often break down, leaving us to cry like Saint Paul, Who will deliver me from the body of this death? I have actually met engineers who told me (in all sincerity) that they lived their lives according to the dictates of Reason, and when I got them enraged—which is easy to do—they told me I was irrational. In LOVE AND WILL Rollo May describes a patient of his, a chemist, who had invented the perfect day-dream erection: a metal pipe extending from his brain directly through his penis. The rest of his body was irrelevant.

There has to be a division of labor here, since it is not so easy to throw away your fleshliness, your vulnerability, your emotions, your mortality, your passivity, and your knowledge that you are an object in a world of objects (try falling downstairs). Thus we find Man the Rational and Woman the Emotional, Man the Soul and Woman the Carnal, Man the Active and Woman the Passive, Man as Humanity and Woman as Nature, Man as Strong and Woman as Weak, Man as Tool-maker and Woman as

JOANNA RUSS

BOOKS

MODERAN, David R. Bunch, Avon, 75¢
THE FALLING ASTRONAUTS, Barry N. Malzberg, Ace, 75¢
IN THE POCKET AND OTHER SF STORIES and GATHER IN THE HALL OF THE PLANETS, K. M. O'Donnell, Ace double, 75¢
HUMANITY PRIME, Bruce McAllister, Ace, 95¢
THE COMMITTED MEN, M. John Harrison, Doubleday, $4.95
PIG WORLD, Charles W. Runyon, Doubleday, $4.95
CAN YOU FEEL ANYTHING WHEN I DO THIS? Robert Sheckley, Doubleday, $4.95



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Man-admirer, Man as Political and Woman as Home-oriented. Every man deserves the freedom to have his own abortion. Man bears his young alive. Man is the only animal who menstruates.

David Bunch, a loud, crude, good poet, has come up with MODERAN, a half-novel, half-collection-of-stories about what it is like to live out the male mystique. Mind and body could not be more split. If you are really Somebody in Moderan, you are 97% new-steel and only 3% flesh; you spend your time as the master of a Stronghold (which runs itself anyway) playing war games with other Strongholds, thinking Deep Thoughts in your hip-snuggle chair (it is kind of hard to walk, somehow, if you're new-metal) and perhaps delectating your aesthetic sensibilities with the tin flowers that pop up through the metal-covered floor of the world at the touch of a button, or noticing the change of seasons by changes in the color of the sky (they rotate the sky very punctually in Moderan). True, there are problems; as Mr. Bunch notes:

> . . .it was envisaged that a few outstanding, special wives might be "replaced" and allowed to share the Stronghold forever-life . . .there were, on science grounds, long and bitterly contested debates as to whether any female of the species would be strong enough to stand that nine-months' battery of the "replacement" operations. Finally, in a spirit of benevolent bravado and what-the-hell charity and choice, the panel, all men, all great new-metal scientists. . .and all, so it chanced, bachelors, said. . . . (p. 62)

Terrified Stronghold Masters receive letters beginning "*Greetings*" (this is a very funny book) but as the narrator says, "Moderan was man country," and the wives end up in a high-walled, maximum-security prison called White Witch Valley.

Death has been licked at last. Stronghold Masters never die, although Strongholds fall. There are robot mistresses with "blue eyes, blue-bulb blue and like small glass globes sliced carefully." Armed with Wump Bombs, "high, shrieking wreck-wrecks," Honest Jakes, walking doll-bombs, and White Witch rockets, there is safety indeed.

So of course the inhabitants of Moderan are terrified over and over and over again. They spend eternity in fear.

The author knows what he's about. There are sly references to Mailer and Hemingway upon the arrival of the new-metal mistress in her carton and excelsior (she later flees the hero, apparently out of boredom), penis-machines that batter down the earth at the

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beginning of the book ("huge black cylinders swung spinning between gigantic thighs and calves of metal") so that new-metal can cover the earth from pole to pole, with no soft spots. There is even soul power (pp. 229 ff) and the hero's very familiar pique when—at the end of the book—he unleashes his great, final bomb, the Grandy Wump, only to find that everybody else has got one, too:

> Not only had they stolen my secret, but vile, vile to the last and plotting, apparently they had installed detective devices to steal my moment of firing! (p. 239)

Part II, "Everyday Life in Moderan," seems to be made up of earlier stories; it is not perfectly integrated with Parts I and III.* Note: of all the flesh-bums still alive in Moderan, the only genuinely willful, hating-loving, human is a four-year-old girl:

> It was in Jingle-Bell weather that Little Sister came across the white yard, the snow between her toes all gray and packed and starting to ball up like the beginnings of two snowmen. For clothing she had nothing, her tiny rump sticking out red-cold and blue-cold, and her little jewel knees white almost as bones. (p. 166)

Five-year-old Little Brother spends his time weight-lifting and thinking about rockets, jets, and space. He will grow up to live out his new-metal immortality in impoverishment and terror, as does everyone else in this beautiful, "dense" (don't read too much at once), and vividly fantastic book. But as Father says, "could one ever think too much about rockets and jets and space?" (p. 170)

The protagonist of Barry Malzberg's THE FALLING ASTRONAUTS knows you can. He has gone mad doing so. The real name of the game is depersonalization. Like Rollo May's patient, Mr. Malzberg's astronaut can only copulate with his wife if he imagines them both to be machines; and again, the only character in the book who knows something is wrong is the wife, although she cannot quite explain what it is. What is astonishing about this novel is not that the protagonist (the point-of-view character) is mad, *but that everyone else is, too.* It is eerie to listen to a mad madman being interviewed by a "sane" madman in a world where any pretense to "rationality" is the maddest thing of all. Mr. Malzberg uses (and perceives) NASA as Big Government, the quintessential split between emotion and reason. In the lucidity of his own insanity, the hero says quite sensibly, on the last page but one:

> "It won't work, don't you see? It won't work. It's just too late and

** Credits for individual stories go back to 1959.*

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> all meant to be this way because this is the way you wanted it. This is what you built and you're just going to have to take the full consequences. . ." (p. 190)

The consequences are the end of the world.

THE FALLING ASTRONAUTS resembles "Still-Life" in Harlan Ellison's AGAIN, DANGEROUS VISIONS. (I am glad to announce, for the sake of clearing up my own confusion, that Barry Malzberg *is* K.M. O'Donnell.) The theme benefits from the comparative roominess of the novel, but the book also seems to become somewhat repetitive, as if Mr. Malzberg suffered from that curse of all free-lance writers: lack of time. (Not time to write, but most importantly, time to think or just do nothing.) Nevertheless THE FALLING ASTRONAUTS is a good book.

Also cursed with silly jackets and sillier blurbs are two other good books by O'Donnell-Malzberg: IN THE POCKET AND OTHER S.F. STORIES and GATHER IN THE HALL OF THE PLANETS (one Ace Double, a bargain). Without anybody's noticing it—except Theodore Sturgeon, in a recent review—Mr. Malzberg has sneaked up on us as a fine writer. The Ace double also suffers from some unevenness, in parts sloppy, in parts poignant, sometimes brilliant, though not as finished as ASTRONAUTS. PLANETS is the better half (it's about a science-fiction convention in 1974). I especially liked ice-cubes "whisking" down a woman's dress like "silvery fish."

HUMANITY PRIME is Bruce McAllister's first novel and a promising one, although a good deal of the story does not cohere scientifically. Mr. McAllister seems to have worked in the way least common in s.f.—that is, the experience of the strange world/strange people came first and the scientific rationale later. I assume this because the "local color" of Mr. McAllister's water-dwelling humans is very well rendered, as is their Siciliana *mamma* who has become a cyborg and watches over her aquatic *bambini* from a grounded satellite. What Mr. McAllister has done is to take s.f. clichés—e.g., the warlike lizard people, the "inborn" yearning of the adapted humans for dry land, the development of new senses underwater, the eternal partnership of Man and Dog (both now aquatic!), and try to recreate them as genuinely realized experience. However, the re-vitalizing (or contradicting) of the clichés *plus* the exposition of these entirely through dramatic development leads to some awful

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holes in the book's logic. Gianna (we are told) has gone crazy because the technicians who made her a cyborg forgot to provide her with REM sleep—surely a very elementary error. (My own theory is that anybody with a "maternal drive" of *9.99* is already crazy.) Moreover, the Man-Dog business really does not move out of cliché; I kept hoping that those funny, hairy creatures who kept trying to play with the mer-people were man's best friend, the noble cat, but no go. And the reproductive system Mr. McAllister has given his people is *awful;* he seems to have been carried away by his successes with telepathy into inventing a method of telepathic copulation, in which the males project a mental image of a legged fish (the longing for dry land, see?) to the females, who thereupon *fertilize themselves*, since they carry both testes and ovaries inside their own bodies. This method of reproduction not only throws away the enormous advantages of sexual reproduction (constant hybridization); it loses even the advantages of asexual reproduction, since we do not have endless repetition of a single individual (as in budding) but what is far worse, *a constant re-shuffling of the genetic material of one person* —in which much hereditary material is bound to get lost for good, by sheer chance. Genetic drift would be very fast in such a group of creatures, and probably lethal. The end of the novel gives us only one Eve, a sure recipe for disaster. There is no reason for this mess. After all, even fish reproduce sexually. There is still less reason for chaste monogamy—or for that matter, heterosexuality. Mr. McAllister has just not thought the whole business through. The real subject of HUMANITY PRIME is mer-life and telepathic consciousness; the mer-dogs, the reptile Cromanths, the whole reproductive mess, and even the cyborg (entertaining as she is) could be dispensed with. I hope Mr. McAllister's next book is less encumbered with traditional material.

THE COMMITTED MEN by M. John Harrison (Doubleday, $4.95) stops where most American novels would begin. It is the British ending the world again; after the Bomb comes the usual Character Consumed by Guilt (I never figured out for what), the Odd Communities, the Plagues, the Realist, the Madmen, and the Dreary Pilgrimage through the Rubble. Finally the characters make contact with some exceedingly interesting "mutants" (especially bred by the Government, actually), and there the

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book ends. The final confrontation with the mutants is especially fine—a weird, parodic version of the Queen of Faerie of old English ballads—but except for an enigmatic character named Nick Bruton (who resembles Michael Moorcock's Jerry Cornelius) most of this is very much a twice-told tale. It is good writing thrown away. The psychological subtleties of dreary suffering, accurate as they were, only bored me. COMMITTED MEN is Mr. Harrison's first novel; I hope that he and Mr. McAllister both learn to cut the cackle and get to the 'osses. They are both good writers.

In an article entitled "Thea and I" published in *Entropy Negative* #3, a fan magazine put out in Vancouver, Ursula LeGuin said that Charles W. Runyon's PIG WORLD made her feel a little sick. I suppose you have to take the book more seriously than I am capable of doing for that. An ineffably silly blend of infantile Marxism, cardboard revolutionaries who carefully summarize their positions to each other, a hero named *Marvin*, for God's sake, who is radicalized *in one evening*, total vagueness as to anybody's ideology or political orientation, and a story that takes half the book to quit summarizing and start dramatizing itself—this is PIG WORLD. There are tremenjus chunks of mysterious exposition about what's happening in West Somaliland, Siberia, and points all over. There's oodles of play-money, which the revolutionaries live on like James Bond. There is a hugeous power machine (Sex, Money, Power, and Megalomania = Revolution!). At the end the hero shoots the villain on Main Street, and the Eternal Feminine tells the hero he's betrayed the revolution by succumbing to Power and forgetting Love—I mean I think so or Mr. Runyon thinks so, but only God knows and she won't tell. PIG WORLD may become a curio on other grounds, though: every woman in it has pubes, breasts, buttocks, and sometimes even a navel! I tend to take these things for granted, but Mr. Runyon (despite his three children and wife, all mentioned in the blurb) has apparently never gotten over that first shock of peeking into the girls' locker room. So we start with Dominique, the mini-skirted sexpot who awards herself in bed to good revolutionaries: "Since she wore the medallions of her sex right out in front, he decided to take her on those terms." (p. 17) (Where should she wear them, on her head?) Dominique's mother, Marie, has breasts (p. 30) and buttocks (p. 32). Faye has

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breasts and buttocks (p. 40). And a navel (p. 61). Teej has breasts (p. 120) and pubic hair (surprise! p. 123). More breasts on p. 149 (Big Yoni), breasts, belly, and "bush" (p. 158), two sets of breasts and a pubis (p. 160), more breasts (p. 181), breasts and pubic hair (p. 176) and a nipple-less, vagina-less goddess (p. 214). The weirdity of all this is that almost all the anatomy is described in the most un-erotic moments, when the women are dying, wounded, fighting, or doing very ordinary things, like driving cars or saying hello. There is one real copulation in the book and that is a memory; naturally there is no anatomy involved, but only the usual overblown imagery of the vague-and-inflated school:

> He had felt the first tremors inside her chest and heard the moan rising up inside her throat. A strangled cry escaped into the room, then the sound burst out like a tiger released from its cage; he was hammered, clawed, ripped, squeezed, and finally annihilated, by her passion. (p. 124)

Alas, the hero survives for duller doings. I myself am writing a novel about a revolution, in which all the males are characterized as follows:

> He was a medium-sized man with round buttocks and lumpy testicles, one longer than the other. They swayed as he walked. Sometimes they swayed freely. His penis hung down in front. I decided to take him on those terms.

CAN YOU FEEL ANYTHING WHEN I DO THIS? is a collection of Robert Sheckley's short stories, very polished, sometimes funny, but mostly haunted by other people's themes or ways of thinking (e.g., James Sallis, Brian Aldiss, Jorge Luis Borges). Many of the tales are slight and conventional. Mr. Sheckley is at his best when he's comic; "The Petrified World" is really original; "Cordle" is quite funny, and "Tripout" ditto. A pleasant book.

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Here is a thoughtful and actionful story about two anthropologists who had spent a year on Procyon IV, a planet with two intelligent species. They had learned the language but were still a long way from actually understanding the alien culture, and it was becoming uncomfortably clear that such an understanding might even be necessary for survival.

A Custom of the Children of Life

by JOSEPH GREEN

EPISTLE TO LIFE: Lil-Lor, Goddess of Life, Heed my Plea. Grant me forgiveness for leaving you and aid my safe return to your protecting arms. For I now commit myself to the first move around the Circle of Life, which begins and ends with you. I pledge myself to your sister Love, and he who loves may not remain wholly devoted to Life. I seek always to return to you, but seldom is the Circle crossed, and the brother gods Hate and Death await me should Love not conquer. But the small men from the stars speak often of love and claim their people too worship such a god. Then should not they obey our goddess of love while on our world? I am only a neophyte, my understanding is small, my head is narrow. I must heed the word of my elders, and they have asked me to set foot on the Circle. I pen these words to record that I have begged forgiveness for leaving you, according to the ancient custom of the Children of Life. I formally declare my primary allegiance withdrawn, O Lil-Lor, that my life may be laid at the altar of your sister Love. Bless me, and see me safely around the Circle. Peace &Harmony.

Ralph Sinclair had listened attentively, but Kaz saw that his partner had not grasped the true meaning of the formal declaration. "Peace&Harmony wants us to *adopt* him?" Ralph

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asked aloud. He looked bewildered but pleased, his normally ruddy face flushing to a darker red. Procyon IV was a 1.14 G planet, and even a slight physical exertion or emotional response was enough to heighten the stocky young ethnologist's color.

Kazimierz Janta forced back the impatience he often felt with Ralph. His overly emotional co-worker was a competent field observer, but weak in the language area. "No, not exactly. He said he loves us and wants to dedicate himself totally to our welfare. That necessarily means living with us so he can supply our every need, fulfill our every wish, and so on. But since we could never be truly happy except in our own home, we must return there at once. It's actually an extrapolite way of asking us to leave, with Peace&Harmony offering himself as a bribe."

"Leave?" Ralph still looked lost. "But why should he want us to go, Kaz? And even if he does, why must he dedicate his life to our welfare? There's something here we don't understand."

"Obviously," said Kaz. He refrained from voicing the persistent thought he often had lately, that they would never understand this planet's two intelligent species. Instead he turned and looked at Peace&Harmony, standing quietly in the door that had been enlarged when they moved into this small wooden house. This Child of Life stood a good two meters twenty centimeters high, and measured almost half that across the massive shoulders. Except for his weapons harness he was nude from the waist up. Ropes of muscle outlined pathways of strength across the broad chest, corded about the thick neck, and operated the extra skeletal structure that supported a second set of arms. The young warrior-priest returned his stare with serenity and what Kaz could only think of as doggish devotion.

Enough time had passed since Peace&Harmony appeared in the door for Kaz to make the gesture of welcome. The giant humanoid acknowledged it by walking to the nearest chair. The heavy wooden boards groaned as they accepted his 160 kilograms of muscle and bone. His legs were almost as round and solid as an elephant's. The four long swords that were a Child's basic armament were carried in scabbards under each arm. With the warrior seated, the bottom two touched the floor.

Peace&Harmony was one of a group of selected young adults on whom Kaz and Ralph had performed intensive studies. Ralph, with his usual

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outgoing warmth, had become a firm friend of almost all of them. Kaz was somewhat reserved by nature and well aware that virtually all the Children liked Ralph far more and worked better with him when they could understand each other. Like the shorter Earthman, they were highly emotional creatures.

Kaz turned to their former subject, and in the lilting, tongue-clicking speech of the Children he asked Peace&Harmony why they must return home to accept his love. When he had the answer, he again interpreted for his partner. "He loves us, but he also loves the Children of Life and the Artisans. We must leave because the elders in the priesthood have decided we are an evil influence. They can accept that we neither work like the Artisans nor train for fighting like the Children, which is bad; but they have observed us eating other animals, and that is intolerable."

"We've been supplementing our diet with locally killed meat for the year we've been here, Kaz. Why would they wait till now to notice it and complain?" Ralph sounded plaintive and indignant. "There has to be something here we don't know."

"I'm sure you're right," said Kaz, moving to the door. Ralph remained convinced that a sufficient accumulation of data would eventually lead to an understanding of the Children of Life and their cohabiting species, the Artisans. Kaz was beginning to suffer doubts. The behavioral facts were available, but all attempts at analysis broke on the rock of their own expectations.

Kaz tilted his lean form against the jamb and surveyed the small village and the carefully tended fields surrounding it. The scene might almost have been from a history book of Earth. The massive central temple of quarried stone dominated the town. All the Children, about twenty percent of the population, lived there in a communal form of life. The Artisans retreated behind the thick walls when one of the giant carnivores emerged from the woods, but otherwise lived in family units in hundreds of small wooden houses. They were small plump humanoids half the size of a man, with only two arms. Industrious and skillful workers, they were the possessors of virtually all technology available to both species. There was something vaguely porcine about their faces which Kaz found repellent.

A large group of Artisans were working in the field that began just past the house

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assigned to the anthropologists, on the side of town nearest the forest. They were guarded by a contingent of the Children, heavily armed as always. Kaz looked the other way, toward the temple. A few of the warrior-priests were practicing swordplay near its steps. The Artisans had not yet invented armor, and the young warriors used real swords. The points and edges were dulled, but all four blades were in action at once, two for attack and two for defense. Concussions and cracked bones were common. In the beginning Kaz had tried to introduce some modern medical techniques to treat the wounded. They had politely rejected them, preferring their own.

At some point lost in history, long before the invention of writing, the two intelligent species on the planet had combined forces. Flint was rare on this continent of heavy forests. Legend had it that the Artisans had somehow discovered metal working and forged the first spears. In their short arms they were of no great help against the larger carnivores, but the Children had seen and put them to more effective use. From that tentative beginning the two herbivorous species had developed a cooperative way of life, the Artisans building and using the tools, the Children defending both against the terrors of their fiercely competitive environment. The size and power of the Children would have enabled them to dominate, but an accident of nature kept their birth rate low. The arrangement had proven equitable, and the two species had advanced from stone-age savagery to the first levels of civilization. And there they had remained, making no further technological progress for thousands of years. Their religious life, however, grew deep, strange, and complex. Each time he felt they were beginning to understand their spiritual beliefs, Kaz found they were concentrating on a single facet. The Earthmen had not even seen an outline of the main body of religious thought.

Peace&Harmony sat patiently awaiting their answer, while Kaz squinted against the light and wondered what to say. For his own part he would have been glad to leave. For the past several months an oppressive sense of helplessness had seeped slowly past his barrier of confidence, silting over his original belief that time would make these people more understandable.

"Well, we certainly couldn't leave, Kaz, even if we agreed to. The ship won't be back for another three months," said Ralph, fussing with the notes he

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took faithfully every day. They recorded the external actions of the two species with accuracy. It was the inner life of thought and attitude which remained wholly beyond their understanding. Lately Kaz had neglected his own notes. Somehow they had started to seem useless. He felt as if he were attempting to chart the movement of deep and massive ocean currents by studying the surface waves. They were blind moles, digging around just beneath the grass on a great mountain of culture and tradition. At the moment they could not predict with certainty what the Children or Artisans would do under any given set of circumstances.

"The fact that we couldn't leave if we wanted to is what worries me, Ralph," Kaz said, turning back to Peace&Harmony. He explained that they must wait on the ship that had brought them and could not depart at once. He also accepted the proffered love, in friendship and gratitude.

The huge warrior stirred, heaved his bulk to the broad and elliptical feet, and lumbered toward the door. He seemed offended. Kaz watched him leave the house with regret. As with all other young adult males, Peace&Harmony was also a neophyte priest. The Children of Life and the Artisans had developed a common language of some complexity, but certain professions were open only to members of a given species. The priesthood was the upward path for the Children. All warriors who survived eventually stopped fighting, became full priests, and advanced through the administrative ranks of the theocracy. The skilled trades were reserved for the Artisans, and only the small people had developed a system of mathematics. As an experiment in learning ability Kaz had taught math to this young adult, including college-level algebra. Peace&Harmony had absorbed it with ease. Kaz had wanted to take his burly pupil on into calculus, to see if he had a natural limit, but the priests had recalled him into temple service. They seemed unwilling to let any young adult associate with the Earthmen more than a few months.

Kaz heard a high shriek of seeming anguish from the field, followed immediately by deeper shouts of warning. He recognized the thin cry and whirled toward the locked cabinet against the wall that contained their guns. It was a sound of fury and death, not pain.

Ralph, for once moving swiftly, dashed for the rear door. He had just time to slam

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it closed and drop the heavy latch. An instant later Kaz heard the first attacking whip clawing at the thick boards. Almost all the dangers to which these people were subject came out of the forest. Kaz had often wondered if they had been assigned to this house because it was always one of the first hit.

There were only two entrances into this stout wooden building, and the open windows were heavily barred. Kaz had ignored the front door because Peace&Harmony had just stepped through it. As he fumbled to get the key into the lock, his hands shaking with fear and haste, Kaz heard the hungry snarling of another whip just outside. And then a long thin arm tipped with a circle of claws snaked through the window above his head. It clamped into his shoulder.

Kaz screamed when the talons bit into his flesh and tried to pull away. He dropped the key and grabbed the round hard arm with both hands, trying to yank the embedded claws free. And then he realized he had panicked and made a mistake; no one pulled away from a whip's grip. He tried to ignore the pain and dropped to his knees, searching for the key. A second arm came through the slots between the bars, and fresh claws locked into the flesh between ribs and hipbone. In agony he looked up and saw the burning eyes of the killer, staring in at him from the top opening. He cried out in a fear he could not repress; that primal lust for death overwhelmed and unnerved, battering him into submission, into acceptance of his fate. And then Ralph was on the floor by him, picking up the key, and though still another arm came through and struck at him, the short Earthman braced himself and opened the cabinet.

Blood was flowing in streams from the multiple claw punctures, and when Kaz tried to reach one of the guns, the small but strong arms held him back. The whips were not intelligent enough to deliberately keep the Earthmen away from their weapons. This one had yearned to kill so badly he had struck through the window, handicapping himself; he could not draw them to his long teeth.

There was a thump! as a heavy body landed on the small front porch. A second later Peace&Harmony backed in through the door, heavily pressed by two whips. He stopped just inside the building, all four swords in his hands, slashing and hacking at the long arms that sought a way past his guard. Only one of the six-armed creatures at a time could enter the door, broad though it was. They walked

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upright and were almost four meters in height, lean animals made of bone and ligament, teeth and claws. And though a hundred species of larger and stronger carnivores roamed this continent, the whips were one of the most dreaded. They had a tribal organization well enough developed to let them attack and defend as a group.

Ralph raised a rifle and shot at the snarling face in the window. He missed. As Kaz finally managed to overcome the straining arms and reach a gun, Ralph aimed more carefully and sent a bullet between the two rows of snapping teeth. There was a thin shriek of hurt and rage. The arms holding Kaz began throwing him violently around. He almost fainted from the fresh pain as the embedded claws ripped and tore at his flesh. The third arm struck at Ralph, and the deadly circle on its end bit into his hip. He was released almost at once as the dying carnivore went into spasms. The two paws locked into Kaz also opened.

The three arms were yanked back through the window. Kaz turned toward the door, raising the rifle. Peace&Harmony was on the attack, two swords trying to reach the lean center body while the other two defended against the seeking claws. Two arms lay on the floor. A third severed paw dangled from the humanoid's chest, blood dripping from its end.

The two swords reached the narrow but muscular trunk before Kaz could get a clear shot. The whip died in a small flurry of crimson. The falling body was knocked aside by the eager killer crowding in behind it, and three sets of sharp claws sought the throat of Peace& Harmony. The fighting warrior reverted to a totally defensive posture but took another wound as one arm got past his guard and locked into the broad chest. Then he cut off two of the multijointed limbs with quick slashes, freed one sword from defense, and tried for the trunk. Kaz fired over his shoulder. A soft-nosed bullet took the wiry killer in the neck, spreading as it entered and almost decapitating him. The claw spasmed open from Peace&Harmony's chest, to be replaced by a circle of blood.

The huge warrior hurried onto the front porch, with Kaz and Ralph right behind him. The fighting raged all around them, with some of the small Artisans still scurrying for cover. After the initial concerted attack it was every whip for itself. Some had scooped up Artisans and were heading back into the woods. Three had managed to kill one of the Children and were trying to

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drag the great body away. The main fighting force of warriors from the temple had just arrived. Procyon's white light glittered off a forest of swords and spears. The four-armed giants were chanting a war cry as they entered the affray.

The three carnivores with the Child of Life were caught, and they turned to fight and die. Several others, lost in blood lust, attacked the huge warriors and died on sword or spear. A few escaped into the woods with squealing, dying Artisans, including some children they had plucked from houses not quickly enough closed. They would live to eat and raid again. Kaz and Ralph got off a few shots with their explosive rifles—they did not have recharging facilities for the more powerful weapons available—and brought down several, though the thin bodies made poor targets. In five minutes the fighting ended, all the whips having retreated to the woods or been killed.

EPISTLE TO LOVE: Lil-Lee, Goddess of Love, Heed my Plea. Grant me forgiveness for leaving you and aid my safe return to the protecting arms of your sister. I now commit myself to the second move around the Circle of Life. I pledge myself to Hate, the brother of Death, and claim his protection and ask for the strength of his mighty arms. For the small Earthmen have denied my plea in your name, to serve them on their own world. They say they want my love, but will not do as I ask and return home. I do not understand how they can accept my love, but not the obligation imposed by acceptance. Their ways are strange, beyond the understanding of a neophyte. And though their bodies are weak, their weapons are strong, better than the best produced for us by the Artisans. Their minds are strange also, and I do not know if hate will move them any more than love. Still, this is the way of the Children of Life, and I must warn the Earthmen according to custom. The longer I know the half-sized men the less I understand them. I do not fear their killing weapons, but I dread the look that will appear in the eyes of Ralph&Sinclair when he learns my love has turned to hate. I formally declare my primary allegiance withdrawn, O Lil-Lee, that my life may be laid at the altar of Hate. Bless me, and see me safely around the Circle. Peace&Harmony.

"But how could he just *decide* he hates us?" cried Ralph, his flushed face betraying his emotion. He turned his

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back on the four long swords of the young adult who had just declared his hate, staring at his partner.

Kaz could only stare back at him. There had been something artificial, almost forced, about Peace&Harmony's declaration of hate. And yet their thick-legged former subject and pupil was slowly but obviously beginning to live his new role. The eyes twitched frequently, and his big hands occasionally clasped and released his sword pommels. One of the many oddities of these people, at least from the human viewpoint, was that a Child of Life could declare himself in a certain state of mind, and then achieve it. But going directly from love to hate seemed an extreme reversal . . . until it dawned on Kaz this was actually one of the more human patterns. Thwarted love not infrequently turned to hate.

Ralph picked up the loose-leaf binder they had compiled of the language, walked to Peace&Harmony, and seated himself in the nearest chair. He gestured to the heavy bench opposite and said, "Will you sit and help me with these words? I'm having a difficult time with the pronunciation."

Ralph was either very brave or very foolish; Kaz often thought both. It was apparent the young warrior was in a highly emotional state. He had turned love to hate by an act of will . . . and Kaz had a moment of illumination. The earlier love had also been an act of will! He had not understood it at the time, but it had been as artificial as the hate. It had been imposed over the firm bond of affection that had already existed between his high-strung partner and the equally emotional Child of Life. Then what had been Peace&Harmony's real feeling toward them when he made his odd request? Kaz realized he did not know. He wondered if there had ever been a real rapport between humans and Children of Life, or if they had only been fooling themselves.

Peace&Harmony abruptly turned and almost ran for the door. Kaz saw that the round face was twisted into lines he had seen only a few times, and on the faces of very young Children. In a human it would have been crying. The declaration of hate had not held up too well under Ralph's determined assault.

Kaz stepped onto the porch and watched their former pupil walking swiftly toward the temple. The Artisans were still cleaning up after the raid, their small busy forms everywhere. There would be a joint funeral ceremony for dead or missing little people after dark, and the

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Earthmen should attend. They had concentrated too much on the outwardly dominant species, the Children of Life, to the neglect of the smaller but actually more productive Artisans. If this static culture ever began moving, it would be the Artisans who provided the breakthrough. A major advance in weapons technology would free them of dependence on their large protectors.

The two species physically met and mingled often and freely, but their life styles were more separate than it seemed from exterior observation. Both worshiped the same gods, but each retained customs not shared by the other. The funeral ceremony for the two Children who had crossed the circle to death would be held tomorrow, in the daylight . . . and a vagrant memory stirred in Kaz's mind. The Children did not "die," they "crossed the circle to death." But they could also cross the circle directly to gods other than Death, or move around it by swearing allegiance to each of the four major deities along the way. Kaz had translated a description of an initiation ceremony that required a Child to pledge his life to each god in turn, something called the "Circle of Life." The order was from Life to Love to Hate to Death, which would explain why Peace&Harmony had gone so abruptly from new love to equally new hate. At the time of translation Kaz had thought it only another oddity, one among thousands equally strange. But later he had learned that a trip "around the circle" was undertaken only by a neophyte priest, one who would remain in full warrior status for many more years. And the circle motif was used only for implementing important decisions made by the ruling hierarchy.

"Do you think we'll ever understand them?" asked Ralph.

"No," said Kaz, and only after the word was out did he realize he truly believed it. Understanding other species was his specialty, and there was a desperate need for it. In this year of 2044 Earthmen had walked on the soil of seventeen inhabitable planets. Primitive intelligent humanoids lived on four of them. Two others had well-developed nonhumanoid civilizations. A seventh contained a feline species on the verge of spaceflight. There were study teams on all the primitive worlds, and delicate negotiations had been started with the inhabitants of the civilized ones. But Earthmen were learning some baffling, annoying facts about interspecies communication.

On Earth there were strong

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similarities between the most primitive man and the best educated. Both had the same body structure, ate foods very much alike, and eliminated and copulated in the same way. Both walked in equal gravity and died after roughly the same span of years. The similarities far outweighed the differences. Yet even there the problems of actually understanding a member of another culture were immense. The New York sophisticate could hardly comprehend the mind of a stone-age primitive from New Guinea, and the life of the former held no meaning to a savage.

No contact with an alien species to date had produced any meaningful exchange. The barrier of language was difficult, but small compared to the cultural burden borne by every word. The Children and Artisans were a good example. They had lived together, two cooperating peoples bound by very strong ties, for unknown centuries. Every member of the society grew up thinking in terms of a two-species community. Yet each had its own life style, complete and whole within itself. The patterns of cooperation and exchange circled around each other like misty arms, meeting here, sliding smoothly past each other there.

At the start of intergalactic exploration *Homo sapiens* had taken it for granted that speaking to another species would only be a matter of learning the language, or perhaps establishing mutual symbol systems. It was not that easy. And one day, as the human network of small scouts spread relentlessly through space, they would meet a civilization of equal or greater power. And knowing how to actually *communicate* with a new species would become an urgent need.

EPISTLE TO HATE: Dan-Nor, God of Hate, Heed my Plea. Grant me forgiveness for leaving you and aid my safe return to the arms of Lil-Lor. I now commit myself to the third move around the Circle of Life. I pledge myself to Death, your brother, and ask for the strength that comes from the lust for death. For the Earthmen were not moved by my declaration of hate. The one called Ralph&Sinclair met it with love and overcame the strength you lent me and sent me running away, as an Artisan flees the whips. But I have talked again with the elders, and again I have been told that the Earthmen must go. They stink of eaten flesh, like the carnivores of the Great Woods. They are unclean, and their

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presence may no longer be tolerated. For the elders have pondered long on the matter and say there can be no meeting of the minds. Our ways are too different, the gulf between our kind and theirs too wide to bridge. Ralph&Sinclair does not understand this, but it is so. I formally declare my primary allegiance withdrawn, O Dan-Nor, that my life may be laid at the altar of your brother Death. Bless me, and see me safely around the Circle. Peace&Harmony.

Kaz heard the sound of heavy feet almost running across the front porch and looked up, startled. It had been a long and exciting day, now almost over. After Peace&Harmony's last visit he and Ralph had cleaned the blood off the floors and walls, and were oiling their weapons.

Peace&Harmony charged through the open door, two swords in his upper hands. He paused, blinking in the semi-darkness, his expression set and grim. There was no trace of the hate that had twitched across his round face earlier. Neither was there any love, or the slightest sign of doggish devotion.

The two Earthmen were sitting at their only table, where Kaz had just reloaded the clean rifle. He grabbed the gun and swung the barrel around, but Ralph was on his feet, a hand uplifted in protest. "*No, Kaz!* There is no need for violence. This overgrown child is not going to harm us."

Ralph walked directly toward the glittering swords, his hands held out in friendly greeting. Peace&Harmony waited, and the swinging blades grew still. The stocky ethnologist smiled with satisfaction and walked directly to the giant humanoid . . . and with a loud cry of grief, Peace&Harmony swung both blades at once, toward each other. The top one took off Ralph's head at the neck, and a fountain of blood spouted upward, hitting the ceiling. The second caught him in the side, penetrating between ribs and hip to sever the spine. The corpse fell loosely to the floor.

Frozen with horror, Kaz could do nothing but sit and gape across the table. Peace&Harmony also seemed to be affected. He paused, staring at his work. But then he turned toward Kaz, and the Earthmen hastily jumped to his feet and lifted the rifle again. When the dripping swords came toward him, he cried a loud warning, and then shot his former pupil in the chest. But the Children of Life had three hearts, and Peace&Harmony kept coming. Kaz fired once more, and then

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tipped the table forward and sprang back. The bullet did not stop the attacking warrior, but the table did. He stumbled when it hit him below the knees, and fell.

Kaz raised the rifle again, but hesitated. Peace&Harmony had dropped both swords, but still had two in scabbards. Kaz had the opportunity for a brain shot, which would stop even a Child of Life, but could not bring himself to do it.

The young warrior managed to draw one knee up under him, heaved on the broad hands, and made it to his feet. Without a glance at his bloody weapons, Peace&Harmony turned and staggered out the door. Kaz ran after him. He had seen two separate regular gushes of blood from the wide chest. But the third heart was still pumping, and the great thick legs carried the heavy body steadily toward the temple.

EPISTLE TO DEATH: Dan-Neer, God of Death, Heed my Plea. Grant me redemption and welcome me, for I come to you to stay. This was not as I wanted it, for I sought to return to the arms of Life. This is not to be. The half-sized Earthmen with their mighty weapons have killed me, and my blood is upon this paper. I have not fulfilled my assigned task, and others must follow the Circle Love, Hate and Death must have their due, and perhaps other neophytes will join me before the second unclean one dies. But I have obeyed my elders, and my mind is at peace. I laid my life at your altar, and you accepted it. Bless me; I come to you. Peace&Harmony.

Kaz moved slowly to the rear door and latched it. On the way back to the front he stopped and checked the food supply. It was low, hardly enough for even a person who ate as little as he to survive a week. But it would probably be adequate. He did not expect death by starvation.

His arms felt strangely weak and tired as Kaz closed the front door, avoiding looking at the body of Ralph in the yard. There was really little point in latching it. The first massive body would break it down, despite its strength. And that body would come. Kaz had remembered a little more about the Circle of Life ceremony. If the first neophyte failed, the task passed to another, and so on until it was eventually completed.

This attempt to communicate had failed. Somehow they had offended the elders among the Children. This business of eating meat was only an excuse. It might be that the elders had become afraid the Artisans

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would succeed in making guns, if they continued to be exposed to them, and no longer need their protectors. It might be some reason so unfamiliar to human thought that it would remain forever beyond their ken. Regardless, the Children of Life wanted them off their planet.

It was quite dark inside the small building, and the daytime sounds of the village had gradually died away. Kaz drew up a chair to face the front door. No Child of Life would attack from the rear. He cradled the gun in his lap and made himself comfortable. It might be a long vigil or a short one, but sooner or later the next neophyte would come. Through the closed door he would offer his love, if the Earthman would leave immediately. And then he would be back, to declare his hate. And back still again, dedicated to death. And on the final round, he would smash down the door. And after him there would be another, and another, until Kaz died or the entire population was decimated.

In this instance, at least, Kaz knew with certainty what the Children of Life would do. They had finally established predictability, a good step along the way to meaningful communication.

Kaz gripped the gun and sat patiently, waiting for the voice of love.

COMING SOON

Next month, in fact, a new novelet by Thomas Burnett Swann, "The Stalking Trees." Dr. Swann has, as always, conjured up a fine entertainment. Also, stories by Barry Malzberg, Philip Latham and a new parody by John Sladek. And, in February, a brand new story from Poul Anderson. The January issue is on sale November 30.

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A new Ben Jolson story, in which the part-time Chameleon Corps agent is wrenched from his ceramics business to attend a tomb opening ceremony on the planet Tarragon. Join the festivities.

Canned Heat

by RON GOULART

THE PRETTY DARK-HAIRED girl crossed her legs, and something crackled and ratcheted up under her short synthyde skirt. "Darn," she said, standing and fluttering her right leg. Tiny silver cogs and fine coppery twists of wire fell to the floor of the spaceship cabin. She smiled, apologetically, sitting again in the flesh-colored chair. "Excuse me, Lieutenant. Where was I?"

Lt. Ben Jolson of the Chameleon Corps was slouched in a sunburned wing chair. He was lean and long, dark and a year from forty, wearing an acrylic civilian suit. "You had it strapped on wrong way round," he told the pretty girl.

"Beg pardon?" Natalie Wex sat up straighter in her pink-toned chair.

"Your monitoring mike." Jolson nodded at the metallic debris. "The listening part is supposed to go on the outside of your thigh, not the inside. Which is why you crunched it. Were you a dancer before you joined the Political Espionage Office?"

"No, but I jog a lot." Natalie placed her palms on her bare knees. "This is actually my first field briefing, Lt. Jolson." She gestured with an outflung left hand. A flap of imitation skin on her wrist popped open and a tiny golden camera flew out, ponging on the piebald coffee table. "Darn."

A panel in the wall of Jolson's cabin snapped open. A grinning blonde lady android stepped out. "Yumping yimminy," she said. "Look at all dat stuff on the rug. Katrinka clean it up, you bet." Her right hand consisted of a powerful suction nozzle. Kneeling, she sucked the mike fragments and the little camera into herself.

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Natalie, the pretty Political Espionage Office agent, frowned. "I shouldn't let her go off with my PEO equipment, should I?"

"Yust part of our wonderful Barnum Space Shuttle service," explained the Katrinka android as she straightened up. "When you travel BSS, you is king." She walked back into the wall.

"Darn," said Natalie. "This isn't the kind of privacy I had in mind at all. I hope you'll bear with me, Lieutenant."

"Why don't you," suggested Jolson, "tell me first why your two PEO buddies dragged me out of my ceramics warehouse before dawn and dumped me on this flight to the planet Tarragon." He was semiretired and, when not on an assignment with the Chameleon Corps, ran a ceramics business on his home planet of Barnum.

"Didn't they mention why?" Natalie gave a small sigh. "Well, those particular fellows are usually assigned only to Interrogation. They haven't developed the habit of politely answering. Well, how shall I begin. . ."

"Who do you want impersonated?" asked Jolson. As a member of the Chameleon Corps, he had the rare ability to change shape at will, to become anyone.

"Maybe I ought to tell you about the tomb first." Natalie stroked her long black hair, thoughtfully, and a miniaturized polaroid camera fell free, bounced on the freckled rug.

"Tomb?"

"We're going to Graxa Territory on Tarragon," said the pretty espionage agent, "for the opening ceremonies of Colonel Papa Bimini's tomb."

"The dictator of Graxa?" asked Jolson. "Is he dead?"

"Of course not. They'd never build a tomb like this for him if he weren't still dictator," said Natalie. "It's an enormous thing, with a library, a concert hall and a sports arena to seat 10,000 people. Shaped like a pyramid. Well, the thing is Colonel Papa Bimini has invited dignitaries from all over the Barnum System of planets to attend the festivities."

"Our Barnum government's relations with Graxa are strained," said Jolson. "So they must want me to do something they can't openly ask Colonel Papa for."

"Exactly," replied the girl agent. "And I'm to be your mistress."

Jolson modified his slouch. "As part of the disguise, you mean?"

Natalie smiled, flushing faintly. "Yes. Think of me as a prop."

Nodding, Jolson asked, "Who?"

"Who? Oh, who do we want

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you to impersonate." She reached down to slip off one of her shoes. "I have the complete dossier here on micro." Working the tip of her heel aside, she pried out a fingernail-sized card. "I think I forgot to pack my microreader, since I was hauled out of bed and briefed with a lot of expediency myself. Could you maybe hold this up to the light?"

Jolson took the minute dossier from between her slender fingers. He crossed the cabin, pushed the fourteenth silver-headed button in a wall panel of twenty-four. "Part of BSS service for its tourist-class passengers," he said. A microreader popped out of the wall on a springy silver stem. Jolson inserted the dossier card. On the porthole-shaped screen appeared a plump, tired and green-skinned young man. He was wearing a crown two sizes too large, and it made his left ear buckle. "Who is he?"

"Crown Prince Memo." The pretty girl agent joined him at the viewer. "He's the heir to the throne of Manjedora Territory on Tarragon. Well?"

"Well what?"

"Do you think you can impersonate him?"

"Sure," answered Jolson. "Where's the real crown prince going to be while I do this?"

"In the Barnum Tongue Lips & Tonsils Hospital back on our home planet. He was secretly taken there last week, though only the ambassador to Manjedora, a few high-placed PEO officials, and his father know."

"A small crowd." Jolson studied the puffy green face on the screen. "Why is Memo in the hospital?"

"Well, he's something of a roue, which is why I'm to pretend to be your mistress," said Natalie. "He's very close to the ruling powers in Graxa, very close."

"Why is he in the hospital?"

"He injured his tongue on a saxophone."

"Oh, so?"

"Manjedora lies in Tarragon's far north, as you may know. It's real snow country most of the year, fiercely cold. Well, it seems while the crown prince was participating in some sort of an outdoor orgy, he decided to play a tune on the saxophone. Apparently the instrument had been out in the cold for several hours. When Memo went to bite the reed, being in his cups, he missed. He ended up kissing the bell end of the sax and his tongue stuck to the cold metal."

"Ah." Jolson turned to the next frame of the dossier. "Does he play the saxophone?"

"Not with his tongue in the shape it is."

"When he's hale and hearty, does he?"

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"Yes. Can you?"

"Good enough to pass at an orgy." Jolson ran the rest of the Crown Prince Memo material through the viewer, stopping to memorize background facts and to assimilate the royal heir's fingerprints. "Do you have samples of his voice?"

"Somewhere on my person, yes. I'll play them for you in a minute."

"Okay, I should be able to do the crown prince," said Jolson. "Now tell me why."

"Basically," said Natalie, limping one-shoed back to her chair, "we're hoping you can get somebody important out of a dungeon." Sitting, she began patting various parts of her body. "I've got the file on that on me someplace, too."

Jolson came back and watched.

He kept falling out of his sedan chair. "Great heavens," Jolson complained on his third tumble off the fat silken cushions. "Will we never reach the bloody tomb!" He was sprawled on the spiky yellow grass of the forest trail they were passing over.

The lead bearer, a soft-voiced bird man, rushed over to help Jolson up. "Forgive us once again, Your Highness," he said as he flicked straw and dust off Jolson's richly embroidered tunic with feathery fingers. "We hadn't anticipated so many snipers."

The left-hand rear chair-carrier was lying dead on the pathway. Jolson, who was now a plump green replica of the young crown prince, frowned at the fallen bearer. "Great heavens," he complained. "Your men are certainly vulnerable. What is this latest band of snipers protesting, may I ask?"

"The famine, sir." He made no move to boost Jolson back up into the sedan chair.

"Isn't that the same thing that batch a mile back were complaining about?"

"It's a big famine, sir."

A few yards behind them on the trail two wide guards were firing up at the trees with blaster rifles.

Jolson indicated the chair with a gesture of one plump beringed hand. "Help me back into this bloody conveyance, will you."

"Um," said the bird man, his beak dipping toward the ground. "Um, we're all out of spare bearers, Your Highness. Would you mind lending a hand? Otherwise your lady friend will get a lopsided ride the rest of the way to the tomb."

Jolson puckered his sea-green lips, eyed the high leafy trees. "Great heavens," he moaned.

Up in the canopied sedan

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chair, which was supported by only two men at the moment, Natalie said, "Ow, ow."

Jolson fluttered his green fingers at the bird man. "Wait one little minute." He moved closer to the elevated chair, asking, "You okay?"

"I just sat on my miniaturized photocopier," said the lovely girl agent. "I have little fragments of it sticking in my backside."

"Oh," said Jolson. "I'm going to help carry this thing for a while."

Natalie let go her left buttock and touched his green hand, pressing. "We can't afford to lose you now."

Instead of answering, Jolson stretched up and kissed the girl. He returned to the head bearer. "She doesn't fancy riding alone, poor dear." He gripped one of the support poles and rested it on his shoulder. As the sedan chair commenced to move again, Jolson asked, "What was that those last sniper chaps were howling?"

"'Food Not Tombs!'" replied the bird man. "It's something of a catch phrase with the rabble at the moment."

"There's the trouble with rabble," said Jolson. "They have no aesthetic sense. Present company excepted."

They journeyed the rest of the way, nearly a mile, without incident. Then the forest ended and a great yellow plain began. A half mile across the plain an enormous ivory pyramid rose up, ten stories high and gleaming in the midday sunlight.

Converging on the new tomb were numerous sedan chairs, landcars and even a few grout-drawn coaches. In the hazy blue air silver air cruisers, each fluttering bright pennants, were circling for landings near the new tomb of Colonel Papa Bimini.

"I would have much preferred to come the ten miles from the capital by air," said Jolson when they were near the ivory pyramid.

"Colonel Papa is in love with the traditions and past of Graxa, Your Highness," explained the bird man. "For his more favored guests he wants to provide. . .what you might call an aesthetic pleasure. Hence the quaint method of transportation."

"Ah, yes." Jolson helped them lower the chair to the ocean-colored mosaic tile which circled the brand-new pyramid.

Natalie stepped out and began limping. "Ouch," she said, taking Jolson's arm.

"Your backside asleep?"

"No, I think I dropped a piece of my concealed atmosphere tester into my shoe. It's all right. Keep walking."

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Jolson halted, knelt and thrust two fingers into the girl's pseudoskin shoe. "There." He pocketed the segmented little nozzle.

"Are you sure you've got the right body temperature for Crown Prince Memo? Your fingers seem awfully hot."

"110 degrees is normal for the crown prince." Jolson sniffed the air. "Smoke."

"From the barbecues." The girl agent pointed. All along the front of the ivory block tomb whole grouts were being roasted on spits over charcoal pits. The grout is something like a cow and something like a horse, with six legs. "And, look, there's the man you want."

"Where?"

"The small orange-juice-colored cat man in the white suit and the apron with Come And Get It! stenciled on the front. He's standing near the main entrance to the tomb, handing out grout grinder sandwiches."

Jolson nodded, watching the cat man they were slowly approaching. "So that's Larry Cosmo, head of the Graxa Secret Police. Okay."

Leaning close to Jolson's green left ear and pretending to nibble it, Natalie said, "He'll know where they're holding Lady Chesterton-Belloc."

"Why didn't you people simply have the Barnum ambassador to Graxa ask Colonel Papa to give her back."

"I explained in space," said Natalie. "This is an extremely delicate situation. Technically, Lady Chesteron-Belloc happens to be a citizen of Graxa, even though her late husband, Dr. A. P. Chesterton-Belloc, lived and worked on Barnum. We can't openly ask them to free her, especially after she came back here from Barnum and agitated and then threw a paving tile at Colonel Papa Bimini himself during a Food Not Tombs riot back there in the capital last month."

Jolson thumbed the small device attached to one of his jeweled finger rings. "Does Larry Cosmo know anything about the Canned Heat project?"

"Of course not." They were ten feet from a rotating grout. "The Political Espionage Office doesn't even know what Canned Heat is. All we know is the Chemical Biological Wing of PEO advanced Dr. Chesterton-Belloc $3,000,000 to perfect a new weapon known as Canned Heat. He died much sooner than anticipated, and all PEO has to show for the investment is two steno notebooks full of coded notations."

Jolson beckoned a lizard man servant and plucked two goblets of green-tinted champagne from the ebony serving

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tray. "Did Canned Heat kill the doctor?"

After a sip of champagne, Natalie answered, "He slipped on a piece of blackboard chalk while giving a guest lecture at the Barnum School of Camouflage and cracked his skull on the rim of a waste hole. That doesn't sound like a secret weapon, does it?"

"Be tough to apply on the battlefield."

"So our only hope looks to be Lady Chesteron-Belloc. Our cryptographers are sure the code used in the notebooks is based on something personal to the doctor. Impossible to crack without some hint from his widow."

"PEO should have asked the doctor for more information in front."

"He was such a creative person, touchy, you know, they didn't want to anger him by pressing for too many details," said the girl spy. "And they liked the title. Canned Heat. It sound formidable."

Three bird princesses and a cat man ambassador were laughing in the vicinity of the small white-suited head of the secret police. They were gathered around a vast fat old lizard man in a sky-blue uniform. The old lizard had the right leg of his gold-striped trousers rolled up and was slapping at his knee with gloved hands.

Jolson strode up to the fat old lizard colonel and hugged him. "Papa!"

Colonel Papa Bimini blinked, then laughed. He kissed Jolson on the cheek. "Memo," he cried. "Now I am nearly satisfied."

"Great heavens, only nearly?"

The old lizard placed a palm on the glittering medals and ribbons over his heart. "My spiritual advisor unfortunately cannot be with us."

"You mean. . .?" began Jolson, not knowing what the dictator meant.

"Yes, the beloved Reverend MacSpondey, our leading authority on resurrection and eternity and related miracles, is still missing." Colonel Papa gestured at the hazy horizon. "Out there somewhere in the great desert. He was attempting to follow the path trod in the wilderness by our ancient prophet Zurzir. I told him he should have gone by landcar and not grout-back. Alas."

"Yes, alas," agreed Jolson.

After a slight, sad pause the dictator announced, "This is my good friend, Crown Prince Memo." He introduced Jolson to the three princesses, the ambassador and a minor king who was passing by. "I was telling them about my last amputation."

"Great heavens, not another

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amputation, Papa," exclaimed Jolson.

The old lizard dictator was about to thwack his metal knee again when he noticed Natalie. "Ho! You have a new companion, Memo, you young devil." He trotted over to the lovely girl, patting her on the right breast. "Yow!" he said, shaking his scaly brown hand.

Natalie smiled demurely at the dictator while moving closer to Jolson. "He grabbed the antenna of my telex," she whispered in his ear.

"I've heard wonderful, wonderful things about your tomb," Jolson told Colonel Papa Bimini.

The old dictator was sucking greenish blood off his thumb. He brightened. "I've got twice as much floor space as any other tomb on the planet, Memo. And you ought to see the view from the pinnacle."

Jolson smiled sweetly, touching his green lips with plump fingers. "Ah, but you know what my favorite room will be, Papa. I'm most anxious to see your library and archives."

Laughing and fondling one of the princesses, Colonel Papa Bimini said, "Would you guess this young rascal was bookish?" Still chuckling, he turned to beckon Larry Cosmo. "Larry, Larry, come over and see who's here."

The cat man secret police chief gave away two more thick grout sandwiches, then joined them. "Memo, dear Memo," he said as he embraced Jolson. "Do you know who cataloged this fine man's books and memoirs?"

"Who else but you?" said Jolson, who'd been briefed on the spaceship. "I was hoping you yourself would give me a tour of the whole wonderful library."

Cosmo's yellow eyes flicked toward Natalie. Watching her, he said, "I always have time for you, dear Memo." He suddenly reached over and flicked a tiny spiral of copper wire off the lovely girl's bare shoulder. "Forgive me, miss."

Natalie smiled. "Memo has told me a good deal about you."

The cat man's cheek whiskers grew more erect as he grinned at her. "We are old friends, Memo and I," he said. "Now why don't you remain here and chat with Princess Pippa, Princess Namora and Princess Glorianna while I whisk dear Memo off to the archives. I'm sure you have no interest in books or memorabilia." The cat man lead Jolson into the giant tomb.

Pulling out another realwood drawer from the high wall of the domed library, Cosmo said,

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"I tried to persuade the old fart nobody could possibly be interested in all this crap, but his vanity is mammoth. He insists on being complete."

The two of them were alone in the big room. Jolson read the label on the drawer. " 'Shoes formerly worn by Colonel Papa Bimini, from the age of 26 to 27.' Fascinating."

"You think this is fascinating," said the secret police head, "wait until I show you his old stockings."

Carefully Jolson detached the tiny PEO hyp-node which was attached to the ring on his middle finger. Hoping it would work better than Natalie's other mechanisms, he readied it in the smooth green palm of his hand. "Actually, Larry, one can never tell what future generations will prize from our era."

"Posterity will have to be even dumber than I anticipate to cherish the old fart's castoff neckties." He tugged out another drawer, grabbed out a half dozen blue-striped neckties. "Papa never wore anything but blue and white ties. Future generations can enjoy six hundred and eighty-one of them."

"Still artifacts such as these help give us a more complete picture of Papa," said Jolson, "man and monarch."

"The most offensive touch of the old fart's is that." High on a pedestal, lit with overhead bars of pink light, sat a large marble coffin with its lid up. There were gamboling grouts and heroic grout-herders carved, much entwined with leaves and fruit, round the coffin.

Looking up at it, Jolson said, "Great heavens, is that to be Papa's. . .his place of final rest?"

"Exactly," replied Cosmo. 'I want to lie among my treasure books,' he says."

"Poor old Larry. Your task has not been an easy one." He patted the small cat man on the back of the neck. He activated the hyp-node concealed in the palm of his hand, and it burrowed into the fur, thrusting out long sharp hooks into Cosmo's skull.

The chief of the Graxa secret police stiffened. He said in a low even voice, "At your service."

"You'll answer any questions and do what I tell you."

"What else would you expect, master?"

"Okay, where's Lady Chesteron-Belloc?"

"At the riding club."

"Riding club?"

"The Colonel Papa Bimini Graxa Riding Club," said the hypnotized and obedient cat man. "I have one of my better dungeons concealed there, immediately beneath the polo field."

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"Where's the club?"

"An hour's flight from here."

"How can I get into the dungeon?"

"You can't," answered Cosmo. "Only myself, myself and the old fart, may approach the underground entrance without being shot. The dungeon is even more exclusive than the riding club."

"How do. . ."

"Hey, are you guys going to keep up the gabfest all the livelong day?" A pelican-headed ambassador sat up in the marble coffin. "My patience is wearing thin. And Princess Moxine of Goteja is vastly annoyed and fretful down in here." He pointed a feathered hand. "We figured nobody would tour the damn library while they were still dishing out chow and free booze outside."

Jolson put a hand on Cosmo's shoulder. "Come along. We'll go talk in the portrait gallery." He'd been sleep-briefed on the floor plan of the entire tomb.

The bird man's large pouchy beak flapped open and shut several times. "I sense something amiss here," he said. "Hold on a moment, Princess Moxine." He climbed out of the deep, wide coffin. He was trouserless.

"Great heavens," said Jolson, smiling at the approaching pelican-headed ambassador. "There is really no cause for all this frumus."

"What's that stuck to your neck, Larry? Tick season is over." He reached white-feathered fingers toward the hyp-node, while with his other hand he began to draw a blaster pistol from the portion of his diplomatic suit he was still wearing.

Jolson, still smiling sweetly, rotated the secret police chief, making him into a shield. He shoved and sent Cosmo dancing into the pelican man.

The ambassador stumbled back, dropping his pistol.

Jolson hopped away, then spun and ran.

"This is your idea of less noise?" asked Princess Moxine from down deep in the coffin.

Jolson knew the layout of the tomb. He headed not for the main exit but inward and up. A dozen or so people were trying the tomb's sea-blue swimming pool as he jogged through the natatorium. The corridors above were empty, and there were no visitors in the Classic Cinema Theater or in the ballet dome. When Jolson went galloping down the center aisle of the tomb's symphony hall, a few of the rehearsing musicians, an all-lizard string ensemble, looked up long enough to frown, but there was no attempt to halt him.

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Slipping into the dressing rooms beneath the hall, Jolson discarded his Crown Prince Memo clothes and rings. He found a concert master's silk jumpsuit which fit him and got into it. At the same time he changed his face to that of an amiable thirty-year-old young man. A face which could pass for associate ambassador, assistant publicist or pretender to a minor throne.

Jolson went directly from the dressing rooms to an exit corridor, then outside into the blurred afternoon.

Jolson was circling the ivory pyramid, working his way through diplomats, princesses and celebrities back toward Natalie Wex. Before he reached her, he saw two uniformed Palace Commandos grab her away from in front of an angry Colonel Papa Bimini.

The fat old lizard man was holding his champagne glass up and pointing at it. A tiny monitoring device was floating among the bubbles.

The commandos dragged Natalie off, each clutching an elbow and a knee, and flung her into a hovering black air cruiser.

"Well, great heavens," said Jolson, watching the cruiser rise into the sky.

Jolson came crawling into the main banquet hall of the tomb immediately after the soup course. Reaction zigzagged through the five hundred dinner guests, starting at the entrance and working across the marble-walled room to the dais where Colonel Papa Bimini was dining with the highest ranking kings and queens among the visiting dignitaries.

As Jolson crawled past the lower tables, the Duchess of Westlake, a large lizard woman visiting from Noventa Territory, dropped the pickled grout's foot she'd just selected from the crystal platter to her left. The pelican-headed ambassador's beak pouch distended and quivered. Several princesses, both human and cat, gasped. A chrome-plated ruby-trimmed serving android allowed a sliced blue tomato to slide down onto the Vice-King of Borbulya's lap.

Groaning up to a kneeling position, Jolson stumbled on toward the Graxa dictator's elevated table. He was wearing a sandy black four-piece suit and a tattered, partially unraveled, black cloak. A crushed black miter was sitting, lopsided, on his grey tangled hair. His face was long and thin now, stubbled with faint grey. Jolson, grunting and snorting, pushed himself completely upright, then went wobbling on toward the dictator's table. Jolson said, through cracked lips, "I hope I'm not too late for dinner."

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Colonel Papa Bimini clapped his scaly brown hands together. He laughed and cried. "Oh, bless the sacred locks of Zurzir the prophet! It's my own beloved spiritual advisor, Reverend MacSpondey, back from the fearful desert." He trotted off the dais, came down to clutch Jolson. "We've given you up for lost." He frowned. "Dear Reverend, you look quite dreadful."

"You know how it is in the wilderness," said Jolson.

The old dictator stood back and studied Jolson, shaking his head. "I think you overdid the fasting."

Larry Cosmo, the secret police chief, was standing up at his place at the right hand of the dictator's. "Praise Zurzir," he exclaimed.

"Speaking of Zurzir," said Jolson close to the old lizard man's earhole. "I saw him while I was lost in the desert."

Colonel Papa inhaled and his medals jiggled. "A vision, Reverend?"

"I assume so," said Jolson. "Zurzir passed on some interesting tips about reincarnation. Also about what kind of tomb you need to make sure you'll join him forever in eternity."

The old dictator gasped. "Don't tell me this isn't the right kind of tomb?"

"Zurzir seemed to have some doubts about the way the rooms are laid out." Jolson guided the colonel back to the dais. There was an exit immediately behind the banquet table. "At least I have the impression that's what he was saying. I had a tough time catching every word, with all the thunder and lightning."

"Oh, that's right," said the dictator, climbing back toward his chair. "The prophet tells us, in the sacred pages of The Holy And Unalterable Words Of The Blessed Zurzir, Revised For Modern Readers, that 'You will often hear me speak out of the thunder and lightning and similar inclemencies.' "

"Exactly." Jolson lowered his Reverend McSpondey voice, which he'd heard late that afternoon on a cassette in a coin-operated temple in the nearby capital city. "The prophet had one especial hint for you. That is, if you want to get a seat in eternity."

"I do."

Jolson made an unconvinced gesture with one bony hand. "Zurzir has some doubts. I don't want anyone else to hear this, Colonel Papa. Can you excuse yourself from the festivities for a brief while and listen in that alcove back there?"

"Certainly, certainly. Larry, take over as toastmaster," said the dictator. "Don't forget to throw in that business about a

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new era of free speech, for those assholes from Barnum."

Jolson nudged the colonel through the exit and into a tile anteroom.

"Well?" demanded Colonel Papa. "What does the blessed prophet have in mind?"

"He's concerned about a couple of women."

"Zurzir? Doesn't he tell us, 'Steer clear of the ladies, if you can'?"

"These particular ladies have each done several good works which Zurzir admires," continued Jolson. "One of them is Lady Chesterton-Belloc."

"That old bimbo. How did the ancient prophet hear of her?"

"He tries to keep informed. Being omnipotent."

"Well, what about that belligerent old squack?"

"She must be released from her dungeon and sent home to Barnum at once."

"Come on now, Reverend. She threw a brickbat at me, called me a hateful despot. Boy, I don't like to spring that one."

"As Zurzir teaches us, 'The path to eternal happiness and bliss is no cinch.' "

"Very well, I'll do it. Who's the other broad?"

"A Miss Natalie Wex, if I heard the name rightly."

Colonel Papa widened his eyes. "How'd he hear about her? I only jugged her this afternoon, for carrying concealed spy equipment and being in cahoots with another, fugitive, spy."

"Sometimes Zurzir keeps up, sometimes he gets a little ahead," said Jolson. "Where are these two favorites of the sacred prophet being held?"

"I've got the pair of them over at the Colonel Papa Bimini Graxa Riding Club. You know, down in the underground dungeon. You blessed it the day I cut the ribbon across the entrance to the new abattoir two years ago. Remember?"

"Of course." Jolson gripped the dictator's arm. "Zurzir implied he'd like these two freed at once."

"It couldn't wait till after dinner? We're having a flaming dessert."

"If it was only me, Papa, I'd say wait until tomorrow or even the weekend," said Jolson. "But the prophet. . ."

"You're absolutely right. I'll summon the royal air yacht and go at once," said the dictator. "As you know, nobody can approach the dungeons unless Larry or I accompany them."

"I'll come along," said Jolson. "Should you need any further spiritual advice."

"Bless you," smiled the old dictator.

A warm arm reached down into Jolson's cabin sleeping pit.

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"I've taken everything off," said Natalie.

Jolson sat up, bringing his head level with the spaceship floor. In the dim light from the light strips circling the pit he could see the slender girl was still wearing a short-skirted dress. "Eh?"

"I mean all my concealed spy equipment. Therefore we can have a private chat, the two of us." She sat, with long legs tucked under her, beside the sleep pit. "I've just now finished dictating my PEO report to our spaceship's andysec. It took longer than I figured, since I had to put it all in code to keep the android from learning anything."

"How's Lady Chesterton-Belloc now?"

"Doing fine. The ship's andymed says she's completely shaken off the effects of the stupefying pills administered to her back in the dungeon on Tarragon." Natalie smiled down at him. "Let me say once more, Ben, how much I appreciate your rescuing me along with the doctor's widow. You really didn't have to. All your job assignment called for was bringing back Lady Chesterton-Belloc."

"I don't like loose ends."

"I admire the efficient way you felled Colonel Papa Bimini and those two dungeon guards and locked them in a spare cell. And you also did a nice job of impersonating that old lizard dictator and ordering his air yacht to fly us to the spaceport in time to catch this ship."

Jolson asked, "Does Lady Chesterton-Belloc know what Canned Heat is?"

"Hasn't the slightest idea," answered the pretty girl. "She never allowed the doctor to talk about his deadly weapons at the dinner table, and, what with his war work and her activism, that was the only time they ever met during the day. She does think, however, she can translate the code in his notebooks. So our first joint mission will be a success all around. That's good, isn't it?"

"Splendid." Jolson watched the lovely girl for a long moment. He reached up and pulled her, gently, down into his sleeping pit.

Something small and metallic pinged against his ear.

"I missed one," said Natalie.

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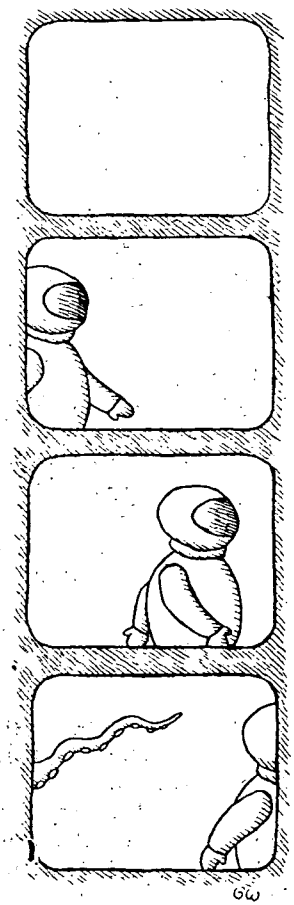
BAIRD SEARLES

FILMS



THE MINORITY VAMPIRE

THIS IS NOT QUITE THE place to go into the sociological import of the recent black exploitation films such as **Blacula** (AIP), by which I mean that in a specifically oriented column such as this it's the horror fantasy elements that presumably are of major interest to readers of this magazine. However, I can't ignore that aspect completely since these films are creating controversy. This is much ado about nothing when one keeps in mind: (1) films are made for one reason only—to make money (goodness, as Mae West said in another context, has nothing to do with it), (2) the trick is to make a film that a lot of people will pay money to see, (3) as long as people will pay money to see these films, they'll keep making them. Besides, why shouldn't there be idiotic black films? Lord knows, there have been enough idiotic white ones.

As a matter of fact, **Blacula** isn't as idiotic as it might be. There are some nice touches and some good moments, though also present are the usual inconsistencies that mar most horror films of any hue.

The premise: In the 18th century, Count Dracula is visited by the prince of a black kingdom of the Niger delta and

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his wife, who are making the rounds of the important men of Europe to enlist their aid in stopping the slave trade. Dracula, being Dracula, approves of the slave trade and does in the husband in the usual way, then confines his undead body to a coffin in a secret chamber. The coffin ends up in modern Los Angeles, having been bought by two antique dealers along with the rest of Castle Dracula's furnishings. They make the mistake of unlocking it, and Blacula is loose in L.A. He soon spies a girl who is the image of his long lost wife, and alternates between chewing on people and courting her. She must come to him of her own free will, which is not unlikely since he has told her his story and she doesn't even look dubious. However, her sister's fiancee is a police doctor. He is bothered by the sudden rash of strange killings and makes the connection to the mysterious stranger. Take it from there; the outline is predictable.

However, there are moments. Count Dracula, after his feast, drips blood from his eyes, a touch that I think is in the original (as in "gorged to the eyeballs," I guess), but not utilized in any previous film that I can remember. The urban setting makes for a change (the initial diagnosis is rat bites), and the full implications of the multiplication factor are well used; by the time the film is over, it seems like half the cast has been vampirized. One scene in particular would seem to indicate that the film makers have learned a lesson from Night of the Living Dead (the hero of NotLD, incidentally, was black, about which no point was made one way or another). The obligatory close up at the end also has a new, albeit obvious, grisly touch.

Production values are competent, and William Marshall in the title role has presence beyond the call of the script, though why they saw fit to give him a semi-wolfman makeup when the bloodlust hits is beyond me.

I can't resist one more sociological comment: in this black film, obviously made to capitalize on the changing black image, the two young homosexual antique dealers are portrayed with exactly the same sort of stereotyping that blacks have been complaining about for years. Plus ca change. . .

In a few months we get Blackenstein.

Late, late show department. . .I finally caught up with Die, Monster, Die (1965), the movie version of Lovecraft's "Colour Out of Space," probably my favorite HPL story. It made the Dunwich Horror film of some years later look

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positively brilliant. The major flaw—of many—was transferring the milieu to a baronial home in England (Arkham, England, no less!) from HPL's decayed Massachusetts hills. I've come to realize that much of the master's horror is evoked, not by his squirming intradimensional thingies, but by his subtler delineations of debased humanity. Also his most successful stories are those that ignore any kind of dramatic human relationships and simply present the horrid facts almost as reportage. The introductions of human entanglements really mucks them up, as the two above mentioned films proved . . . .The Extraordinary Seaman (1969), though directed by John Frankenheimer, was apparently thought to be so bad that it was never given a theatrical release. It has showed up on TV lately, and it's a hell of a sight better than a lot of things one does see in theaters. It combines a 40s romantic-fantasy plot, about a sort of WW II flying Dutchman, but played for laughs, with Richard Lester Help type intercutting of real footage from 40s newsreels, spliced in for comic effect. Bess Truman steals the show with her desperate attempt to launch a ship with a nearly unbreakable champagne bottle.

Things-to-come department. . .Like Alice, Dracula seems to come in pairs. Upcoming, a new version with Harry Nilsson, whose rock albums have been very hot indeed this year, as Dracula, and Ringo Starr as Merlin. Merlin?

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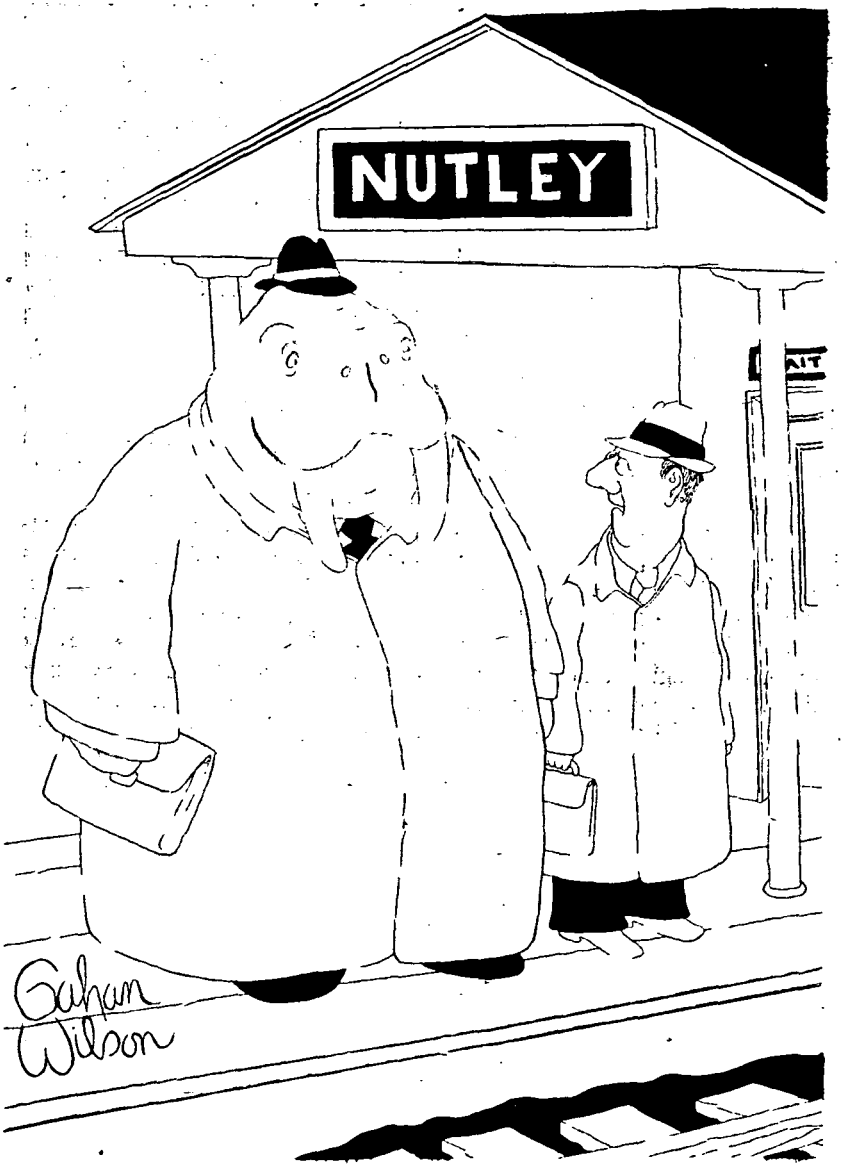

"You know, Phil, you've really done very well for a walrus —"

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Books That Never Were

ARTICLE

by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

ABOUT THE BORDERS OF the land of literature flit a multitude of ghostly books that are, yet are not: unfinished books, lost books, apocryphal books, pseudepigrapha (falsely attributed books), and books that were never written at all but exist only as titles or allusions in works of fiction. Some of these last have led active literary careers despite the fact that they never existed.

The oldest of these "pseudobiblia" is the *Book of Thoth* of sinister occult repute. The *Book of Thoth* made its debut in an ancient Egyptian novel, *The Story of Setnau Khaemuast*, known from a Ptolemaic papyrus but probably much older.

According to the novel, the *Book of Thoth* was penned by the Egyptian ibis-headed god of wisdom and letters, Tehuti or Dhuti (Greek, Thoth). In it were two spells. Reciting the first enabled one to enchant heaven and earth, sea and sky, mountains and rivers, to understand the birds as they flew and the serpents as they crawled, and to call fish to the surface. The second enabled one dead in his tomb to resume life and to see the sun, the moon, and all the company of the gods. Tehuti inclosed the book in a golden box, and that in a silver box, and that in a box of ivory and ebony, and that in a wooden box, and that in a bronzen box, and that in an iron box. He bound the iron box with chains, sank it in the Nile, and surrounded it by serpents and scorpions.

There the book remained until the wizard Neferkaptah learned about it. Neferkaptah parted the Nile by magic (as Moses was later said to have done with the Red Sea), slew the guardian vermin, opened the boxes, and took the book. To memorize the spells, he wrote out a copy, washed the ink off the papyrus with beer, and drank the beer.

Tehuti was a good-natured god, but like any bibliophile he

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would not brook the theft of a limited first edition. He prevailed upon Ra to drown Neferkaptah's wife and son, and the wizard drowned himself in grief. The book was buried with Neferkaptah at Memphis.

Then another magician, a son of Rameses II named Setnau Khaemuast, heard of the book. He magicked his way into Neferkaptah's tomb, where he found the ghosts of Neferkaptah and his family living snugly in a room lit by the glow from the book. Neferkaptah's ghost refused to give Setnau the book and warned him of dire doom if he took it. They finally agreed to settle the argument with a game of checkers. Setnau won and left with the book. Not yet beaten, Neferkaptah caused Setnau to fall in love with the evil woman Tabubu, who brought disasters upon him until he was glad to return the book to the tomb.

When the papyrus was recovered early in this century, fantasy writers seized upon the *Book of Thoth* as a natural prop for their stories. Lovecraft mentioned it in "Through the Gates of the Silver Key," and it formed a major element in Sax Rohmer's *Brood of the Witch Queen* (1924). The latter, which has been reprinted several times, is a fine piece of early XXth-century eldritch horror. It teems with bats, scorpions, and dark supernatural doings about the Great Pyramid of King Khufu at Giza. (Pyramid Hill is a natural site for sinister supernatural hijinks; if a tenth of the ghastly events of the stories had really happened there, you couldn't get a tourist near the place.) In Rohmer's tale, the villain uses the *Book of Thoth* to send fire elementals to incinerate the heroes. Having escaped broiling, the latter secure and destroy the book. The next time the villain invokes a fire elemental, he cannot control it and is himself burnt to a fine crisp.

Although Tehuti's magnum opus lay forgotten for two millennia, the god himself was soon credited with enough other books to keep even a god-of-letters happy. Egyptian sacred literature was attributed to him as a matter of course. The syncretistic religious movements of Ptolemaic Alexandria merged Tehuti and his fellow god Anpu (Anubis) with the Greek Hermes, and this merged god became known to classical writers as Hermes Trismegistus ("thrice greatest"). Clemens of Alexandria described the priests of Hermes as carrying forty-two "books of Hermes" in a procession. Thoth-Hermes was credited with collections of windy syncretistic Alexandrine religious writings. Christian and Muslim writers made Hermes

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into a mortal king of Egypt, who had reigned at the time of the Flood and had written thousands of books on magic and alchemy. Alchemical works thus came to be called "hermetic," and through alchemy the word came into our language with the meaning of "airtight."

Medieval times saw a host of pseudepigrapha: works falsely attributed to Aristotle, Aquinas, Enoch, Solomon, Toz Graecus (our old friend Tehuti again), and other worthies, real and mythical. There were also unwritten works, such as the alleged ghastly atheistic blasphemy, *The Three Impostors.* Supposedly a diatribe against Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, it was attributed to various independent thinkers like Emperor Frederick II and Spinoza.

One unwritten book of the time was the grimoire, or book of spells, possessed by Virgil the Necromancer. Beginning in the XIIth century, medieval writers transformed Augustus' court poet, the mild and harmless Publius Vergilius Maro, into a mighty magician who had built Naples on a foundation of eggs, owned a prophetic brazen head, built a whirling castle, and kept an army of robots to trounce his foes. My colleague Avram Davidson has lately exploited the mythical Virgil's milieu for his own stories.

Virgil's book had belonged to the magician Zabulon, who, of Jewish-heathen descent, had practiced his art around 1200 BC. He died on the Magnetic Isle, in a sea surrounded by gryphons, sirens, and crocodiles, having left orders for his book to be buried under a stone at his feet. Shipwrecked on the Magnetic Isle, Virgil discovered a demon imprisoned in a glass by the seal of Solomon. Virgil released the devil in return for the latter's promise to lead him to the book. The demon taught Virgil to read the Chaldean characters in which the book was written. Then Virgil, mistrusting his tutor, tricked the devil into re-entering the phial and stoppered him up again.

A sorcerous pupil of Virgil was "Melino," who is simply the Arthurian Merlin as adapted by Aliprandi, the historian of Mantua, about AD 1414. Once, in Naples, Virgil sent Melino to Rome to fetch his book. Melino disobediently opened the book, whereupon a cloud of devils assailed him. He got rid of them by commanding them to build a road from Naples to Rome.

Merlin is the subject of almost as vast a literature as his master Arthur (see "The Quarter-Acre Round Table," in *F&SF* for July, 1970). Countless theories have been spun, purporting to show that he was or

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was not a real man. A plausible suggestion by Prof. E. K. Chambers is that Merlin was an eponym of Carmarthen. That is to say, he was invented to furnish an origin for the name of the city. In Roman times, Carmarthen was called Maridunum, "sea fort," the first half of the names being Latin and the second, Celtic. Dark Age Britons corruped this to "Myrddin" and added the Celtic prefix Caer-, "town," whence the medieval Welsh form Caermyrddin. At last Geoffrey of Monmouth or one of his sources assumed that this name meant "Myrddin's Town" and invented a Myrddin or Merlin to play the role of this supposed local hero.

In his prettified version of the Arthurian legends, Tennyson ascribed to Merlin a grimoire like Virgil's book:

O, ay, it is but twenty pages long,
But every page having an ample marge,
And every marge enclosing in the midst
A square of text that looks a little blot,
The text no larger than the limbs of fleas;
And every square of text an awful charm,
Writ in a language that has long gone by,
So long that mountains have arisen since
With cities on their flanks. . .
And every margin scribbled, crost, and cramm'd
With comment, densest condensation, hard
To mind and eye; but the long sleepless nights
Of my long life have made it easy to me.
And none can read the text, not even I;
And none can read the comment but myself;
And in the comment did I find a charm. . .

(Merlin and Vivien)

With less than his usual astuteness, Merlin lets the wicked Vivien talk him into revealing the charm, which she promptly uses to entomb him in a hollow oak.

Perhaps the most influential modern unwritten classic is the *Book of Dzyan* (pronounced something like "John") invented by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, the founder of Theosophy. Her chef-d'oeuvre, *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), consists largely of excerpts from the *Book of Dzyan* interspersed with her own lengthy commentaries and diatribes against "materialistic" science and "dogmatic" religion.

The *Book of Dzyan* was alleged to have been written in the forgotten Senzar language in lost Atlantis. Her Mahatmas showed Mme. Blavatsky a copy of the book, written on palm-leaf pages; during their

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visits to her from Tibet in their astral bodies. The *Stanzas of Dzyan* begin:

1. The Eternal Parent, wrapped in her Ever-invisible Robes, had slumbered once again for Seven Eternities.
2. Time was not, for it lay asleep in the Infinite Bosom of Duration.
3. The Universal Mind was not, for there were no Ah-hi to contain it.
4. The Seven Ways of Bliss were not. The Great Causes of Misery were not, for there was no one to produce and get ensnared by them.
5. Darkness alone filled the Boundless All. . .

Presently the Universe awakens: "The last Vibration of the Seventh Eternity thrills through Infinitude. The Mother swells, expanding from without, like the Bud of the Lotus. . . After great throes she cast off her old Three and put on her new Seven Skins, and stood in her first one. The Wheel whirled for thirty crores more. It constructed Rûpas; soft Stones that hardened; hard Plants that softened. Visible from invisible, Insects and small lives. . .The Water-Men, terrible and bad, she herself created from the remains of others. . ."

And so on, through the seven planes of existence, the seven cycles through which life evolves, and the Seven Root Races of man (of whom we are the fifth). Critics soon showed that Mme. Blavatsky's sources for this gaudy cosmos were neither so ancient, so erudite, nor so authentic as she pretended. Most of the *Stanzas of Dzyan* were but a paraphrase of the ancient Sanskrit *Rig-Veda*, as a comparison of the two works readily shows. Her other sources were several well-known contemporary scientific, pseudo-scientific, and occult books, plagiarized without credit and used in a blundering manner that showed but skin-deep acquaintance with the subjects discussed.

Nevertheless, HPB kept control of a sizable body of followers even after she had been exposed in many chicaneries. Her *Secret Doctrine* influenced such luminaries of the Atlantist cult as Augustus Le Plongeon, Paul Schliemann, and "Colonel" James Churchward, author of the books on Mu. For the article he sold to the New York *American* in 1912, "How I discovered Atlantis, the Source of All Civilization," Schliemann (a grandson of Heinrich Schliemann the archaeologist) devised a Chaldean manuscript from (of all places) Lhasa, Tibet. Alas, this manuscript never materialized.

Being so inaccessible, Tibet was long a favored site for such imaginative discoveries. There in 1887 the Russian journalist Nicolas Notovitch found his

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apocryphal *Unknown Life of Jesus Christ.* He said that, while he was recovering from a broken leg at the Himis Monastery, the Chief Lama had read the work to him. Investigation showed that the Chief Lama of Himis had never heard of Notovitch, and the basis for the broken-leg story was that Notovitch had been treated for toothache at the hospital in nearby Leh. These findings did not stop the *Unknown Life* from being reprinted as a great discovery in 1926.

During the first third of this century, Robert W. Chambers was one of the most prolific and successful of American writers of popular fiction. His second published book was a collection of short stories, *The King in Yellow* (1895). Of these ten stories, some are fantasies and some are based upon Chambers's earlier life as an art student in New York and Paris. In several stories appears a mysterious book, *The King in Yellow:* a volume of such sinister power that those who start reading it are unable to stop and are driven to madness, murder, or suicide. One narrator explains:

If I had not caught a glimpse of the opening words in the second act I should never have finished it, but as I stooped to pick it up, my eyes became riveted to the open page, and with a cry of terror, or perhaps it was of joy so poignant that I suffered in every nerve, I snatched the thing out of the coals and crept shaking to my bedroom, where I read it and reread it, and wept and laughed and trembled with a horror which at times assails me yet. This is the thing that troubles me, for I cannot forget Carcosa where black stars hang in the heavens; where the shadows of men's thoughts lengthen in the afternoon, where the twin suns sink into the Lake of Hali; and my mind will bear forever the memory of the Pallid Mask. I pray God will curse the writer, as the writer has cursed the world with this beautiful, stupendous creation, terrible in its simplicity, irresistible in its truth—a world which now trembles before the King in Yellow. . .

Several of these ideas, such as Carcosa, Chambers borrowed from the stories of his older contemporary Ambrose Bierce. Chambers gave a brief quotation from *The King in Yellow* as a headpiece to his story "The Mask":

CAMILLA: You, sir, should unmask.
STRANGER: Indeed?
CASSILDA: Indeed it's time. We have all laid aside disguise but you.
STRANGER: I wear no mask.
CAMILLA: (Terrified, aside to Cassilda.) No mask? No mask!

The reader, however, never learns who composed or is circulating this baneful book, or what all these fascinating

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figments mean. Bierce and Chambers also influenced the most fertile recent creator of pseudobiblia: Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937). In his stories of the Cthulhu mythos, Lovecraft created a fictitious library, including the prehuman *Pnakotic Fragments*, the *Seven Cryptical Books of Hsan*, the "puzzling Eltdown Shards," and, most portentous of all, the rare and accursed *Necronomicon*. We are told that this fearful work was written about AD 730 by a mad Arabian poet, Abdul Alhazred, and later translated into Greek, Latin, and modern languages. Abdul himself came to a bad end, being devoured in broad daylight by an invisible entity. Lovecraft published quotations:

> Nor may those who pass ever return, for in the vastnesses transcending our world are shapes of darkness that seize and bind. The Affair that shambleth about in the night, the evil that defieth the Elder Sign, the Herd that stand watch at the secret portal each tomb is known to have and that thrive on that which groweth out of the tenants thereof:—all these Blacknesses are lesser than HE WHO guardeth the Gateway: HE WHO will guide the rash one beyond all the worlds into the Abyss of unnamable devourers. For HE is 'UMR AT-TAWIL, the Most Ancient One, which the scribe rendereth as THE PROLONGED OF LIFE.

Lovecraft's scholarly quotations and references made the *Necronomicon* seem so real that librarians and booksellers were plagued by people asking for it. Other writers for *Weird Tales* joined the game, writing pieces in the same setting and adding gods to the Cthulhu mythos and pseudobiblia to its reference shelf. These last included the Hyperborean *Book of Eibon* (Clark Ashton Smith), Comte d'Erlette's *Cultes des Goules* (August Derleth), von Junzt's *Unaussprechlichen Kulten* (Robert E. Howard), and Ludvig Prinn's *De Vermis Mysteriis* (Robert Bloch). Lovecraft generously welcomed these additions and adopted some for his own stories.

Once the *Necronomicon* almost materialized. In the 1930s, Manly Wade Wellman, then a leading fantasy writer (and now teaching at UNC and Elton College), entered a little basement bookshop in New York, where books teetered on sagging shelves and dust lay thick. A little old woman, who looked as if she had just laid aside her broomstick, asked him what he wanted. Joshing, Wellman replied:

"Do you by any chance have a copy of the *Necronomicon?*"

"Why, yes, heh heh," cackled the crone, "right—about—here!"

It was a false alarm, but the event gave Wellman quite a

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turn. He used it in a story, "Letters of Cold Fire" (*WT*, May 1944) wherein the book is really on the shelf.

A contemporary of Lovecraft, who is happily still amongst us and still turning out hilarious light entertainment, is Pelham Grenville Wodehouse, creator of Psmith, Jeeves, and other droll natives of the England of George V. P.G. also created a noted pseudobiblion, the memoirs of the Honorable Galahad Threepwood, the sprightly younger brother of Clarence, ninth Earl of Emsworth. In *Fish Preferred* (1929) Gally is working on his memoirs, which largely concern the escapades of his dissolute youth. Albeit now middle-aged, he is cheerfully unrepentant. True, his excesses seem to have consisted mainly of staying up late, getting tipsy, and dating chorus girls. Nonetheless, many of his contemporaries, now matured into stuffy respectability, yearn to suppress the record of their own youthful follies. Here is Galahad at work:

> Ronnie Fish sprang from his chair, threw his head back, and uttered a yodel of joy so loud and penetrating that the door of the small library flew open as if he had touched a spring.
>
> A tousled literary man emerged.
>
> "Stop that damned noise! How the devil can I write with a row like that going on?"
>
> "Sorry, Uncle. I was just thinking of something."
>
> "Well, think of something else. How do you spell 'intoxicated?'"
>
> "One 'x.'"
>
> "Thanks," said the Hon. Galahad, and vanished again.

In *Fish Preferred*, Gally agrees to withhold his autobiography from publication in order to enable two young hearts to beat as one. In a later novel, *Heavy Weather* (1933), he is still working on the memoirs. The manuscript, however, is devoured by the Empress of Blandings, Lord Emsworth's prize pig, causing Gally to give up the enterprise.

Still, considering the enviable longevity of Wodehouse's characters—the woolly-minded Emsworth has not aged a day from his appearance in *Something New* (1915) to the current *No Nudes Is Good Nudes* (1970)—I doubt not that, if he put his mind to it, the Hon. Galahad could re-create his masterpiece. The only trouble is that his confessions would seem so tame. At his most raffish, he never mainlined heroin, burned a bank, or blew up anybody with dynamite.

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About three years ago, we bought Raylyn Moore's first F&SF story ("They All Ran After The Farmer's Wife," April 1970). Since then, we've seen and published four others—all notable for their fresh ideas and clean, economical execution—so it's time, we feel, to pause here and remark upon a fact that we hope has not escaped the more than casual reader: that Mrs. Moore has quietly established herself as one of the superior writers in the field.

Lobster Trick

by RAYLYN MOORE

HAVING WORKED AT THE same job, at the same desk, for nineteen years, Hank Backstay knew all the answers. And although he specialized in answering questions which belonged in the realm of sanity, the nature of his job had given him fair competence at dealing as well with the other kind.

His desk was the night city editor's of the *Ranceford Evening Trump*. The title "editor" was somewhat misleading, for Hank did no editing. Nor was there any night staff except Hank himself, there never having been a morning edition of the *Trump*, only a "street" and a "home," both of which came out in the afternoon, produced by the regular day staff.

Hank knew all the answers because during his hours at work, ten at night to six in the morning when the wire editor came in, time tended to drag, and Hank filled in his shift by reading all the dictionaries, almanacs, and other reference works around the office. Consequently he had always at tongue tip the name of the American ambassador to the Dominican Republic in fifty-eight, the rate of exchange for the rupee in thirty-four, the batting average of Home Run Baker, and contents of papal encyclicals for a hundred years back. He also knew the meanings of words like "lithofacies," "subplatyhieric," and "dyslogistic."

Though Hank was not a bitter man, and seldom allowed thoughts of the past to encroach on a naturally strong sense of optimism, the night job

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was in the way of a penance, not for his own shortcomings, but another person's. Nineteen years before, young Backstay had been a promising dayside reporter on the *Trump*'s courthouse run. One day Judge Bevis, a tottering ninety and growing careless, had handed out to Hank for publication two lists of five names each. One was a group to be arraigned that day for unnatural sex practices, the other a newly appointed board of trustees for the Alma Bevis Foundation for Wayward Girls, named for the judge's late wife.

What happened, of course, happened. No "correction, retraction, and apology" ever flies so swiftly as to overtake the original story, especially if it's a scandalous one. Worse, that very night the judge died of a heart attack—while reading his home edition—so there was no one left to exonerate Hank, who would have been fired outright except for circumstances: the paper had recently been bought by an Eastern chain upon the retirement of Hank's grandfather, the *Trump*'s founder; somewhere in the reshuffle there had been a gentlemen's agreement about Hank's having a job for life, should he want it. Hank, who considered his time with the *Trump* a mere apprenticeship to joining some better known organization in the media field, had not exactly wanted it, but because of the clouded record, his career was temporarily on ice.

But that was the word, so far as Hank was concerned: temporarily. He never thought of the matter without the accompanying assurance that ultimately he would accomplish some piece of work which would at once wipe out the past fiasco and bring his name to the attention of *Life*, or *Newsweek*, or the Pulitzer committee. True, he was in no likely position for a journalistic coup. Ranceford was a small, quiet city where black and white children were bused without rancor or riot, corruption among civic leaders was never uncovered, the crime rate was near the lowest figure in the nation, and the generations seemed to coexist with minimal friction. Even airplanes managed to fall down in locations well out of the *Trump*'s circulation area. Ranceford Creek, the only waterway within miles, had been tested for pollution and declared safe. There was no smog. The community was nowhere near a quake fault. When the downtown sector underwent a mild attack of urban renewal, no person or group objected. The area was never suggested as a possible site for a rocket base,

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or a nuclear plant, or even any major industry.

Yet Hank never gave up hope. And through all the potential discouragement, he held fast to two courses of action, or rather, inaction. He would not leave his hometown out of a superstitious fear that if he did go, jobless, looking for greener fields, all hell would somehow come loose in Rance-ford in his absence. Secondly, he would remain free from involvement, human or financial; that is, he would never marry or take on debts, but remain completely mobile so as to be able to move out on the instant's notice his big chance would require. Accordingly, he stayed on in the family home left him by his parents, in a neighborhood so quiet that even the bird songs of summer and the gentle rasp of snow shovels in winter seemed muted by the general hush of residential-area living.

Meanwhile, as the years passed, Hank had grown almost fond of his night job. The calm of the office was as relaxing as that of his home, and when the telephone did ring, it was almost certain to be at least a moderately interesting call. This, Hank had discovered, was because for some reason only interesting people made calls to newspapers between midnight and dawn. Through the day, readers were forever phoning up about talking dogs, six-toed cats, chickens with double rectums, and two-year-olds who could recite the Preamble. Late at night, however, the quality of the reports subtly improved. It was then the callers would tell about encounters with spirits, sightings of UFO's, precognitive experiences, visions of saints, adventures as victims (or practitioners) of obeah, and so on. Often, too, Hank's night communicants would require esoteric information of some kind, and this gave him the satisfying opportunity of combining his two favorite nocturnal interests: talking on the phone, and knowing all the answers.

"How do crustaceans reproduce?"

"They're oviferous," said Hank without an instant's hesitation. "In most species the female carries from three thousand to a hundred thousand eggs attached to the swimmerets. There's also a receptacle on the abdomen in which she carries sperm donated by the male until she's ready to fertilize the eggs. In the case of some of the smaller isopods—"

"And is it really true," said the telephoner, "that if one of these animals tears off a claw or leg, he grows another?"

"Quite true," Hank af-

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firmed. "The regenerative powers are remarkable. Take for example the common freshwater crayfish. Any appendage lost by accident or in battle can be restored in as little time as—"

"But not if the body is damaged, right? Supposing the—ah—lobster or whatever were split right down the middle, then both halves couldn't grow new halves and become two separate lobsters, could they?"

"No, but this kind of reproduction by fission is common enough among some of the simpler life forms. Now the amoeba—"

"Well, thank you very much," the caller said, and hung up.

It was a deadwinter night in Ranceford. The steam radiator whispered discreetly at Hank's elbow. Across the room one wire machine went: thump-thum-thum-thump pause thump-thump pause thump pause pause pause. Ordinarily a third intermittent but unobjectionable background noise kept Hank company in the news room, but at about midnight—it was now one o'clock—the police radio had conked out, and while the night city editor presumed the cause to be something haywire in the mechanism, his sciolism did not extend to electrical or mechanical things; so he had decided to leave it alone.

Hank considered going for a beer, or maybe coffee, but a strong wind had risen; he could hear it wuthering at the corner of the building even with all the windows closed. And to get to the Chinese joint, which was the only place open at this hour, he would have to walk three blocks through dank, ill-lit alleys. So he turned back to the almanac and resumed reading the section on marine, railroad, and natural disasters since 1856, noting that there had been nine hundred thousand fatalities in the Hwang Ho River flood of 1887 in China.

A lady called to say she was a medium who had unexpectedly established communication with Adolphe Menjou, and did the *Trump* want to interview him? "Sure," said Hank. "Put him on the line."

"I don't know if he'll agree," the lady said, "but I'll try. The fact is, tonight is a negative time. There are curious psychic disturbances I can't account for yet. Anyway, here is Mr. Menjou."

A protracted pause followed, during which only a few throbbing sounds came over the phone. "Hello there?" Hank said cooperatively. "Hank Backstay here." After about five minutes he put the handset on the desk so he could hear if the medium returned, and after a second five-minute span re-

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gretfully broke the connection when a call came in on another line. Although the beginning of the evening had been deceptively slow, this was evidently going to be a busy night.

"City desk. Backstay," Hank said absently, while noticing that six hundred eighty-nine people had died in the Indiana-Illinois tornado of 1925.

"How about living without water?" the voice asked.

"Some nutritionists advise not drinking any on grounds the body takes in more than enough from fruits, vegetables, and other foods," Hank allowed.

"No, no. I mean for sea life. How long can they live without being actually in the water?" It was the crustacean man again.

"Various lengths of time, depending on what sea life you're speaking of. Carp and other hardy fish sometimes go on gasping for hours after they're caught."

"How about lobsters?"

"Oh, they can live almost indefinitely out of their element because of a different kind of breathing apparatus. They carry large quantities of water in their gills, like all crustaceans. Take the fiddler crab—"

"Excuse me. I must hang up now. Thank you for the information."

The wire machine jammed. It flailed away like a wounded mechanical bird, delicate metal pinions beating madly while Hank, forgetting to shut off the switch, removed wadded paper from the platen, trimmed the ragged end of the new paper from the supply box, and got the process started right again. On the way back to his desk he looked from a window at the nearest streetlight and discovered it had begun to snow. Moreover, the wind, with increasing ferocity, was beginning to swirl the stuff into a blizzard.

Hank spoke helpfully with someone requiring the exact results of international savate competition from nineteen forty-nine through fifty-nine. Then there was a lull again, but the night editor, instead of returning immediately to his reading, yawned prodigiously and began to reflect on the events of the day which had preceded this evening's shift. Come to think of it, it had been an extremely extraordinary day.

The confusion had begun in the hours before noon, the time Hank usually spent in bed. What with his nearly two decades as a daylight sleeper, he had developed the necessary (even in that quiet neighborhood) defense mechanisms which made it possible to remain restfully unconscious

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through the muted bird songs, the prattle of passing school children, and the occasional respectful rappings on his door of salesmen and missionaires. This morning, however, a totally alien kind of noise had impinged on his sleep. It was a querulous whine, persistent as a buzz fly, which remained steady, yet had an irregular rise and fall. As he came gradually to consciousness, he was aware that this was not the first time the sound had occurred; this was only the first morning it had brought him completely awake, though he had been aware of it in an unconscious way for some mornings past. And the really peculiar thing was that it seemed merely the solo voice in a whole chorus of new noises, all of which were plainly coming from over the hedge at the house next-door, into which—Hank had also been vaguely aware—some new people had moved the previous month.

Fully conscious at last, he lay there with his bedroom window open on the frosty morning and identified as many of the sounds as he could. The whine was being made by a power saw, he decided. When it finally cut off, there followed the noise of a hammer. In the background was an incredible variety of animal sounds. He identified the honking of geese, the howl of a wolf or coyote (though it must have been a dog), the bray of a jackass, and the Bronx-cheering of sheep or goats. On recent days as he slept, he now also recalled, there had been the crowing of a rooster and—he searched in memory—the trumpeting of an elephant, though surely this last must have been a dream.

As a newspaperman, even one rudely awakened, Hank was more curious than angry. The separating hedge on that side, of thickly matted cypress which had gone untrimmed for years, could not be seen over, not even from Hank's second-floor window. So he rose, dressed, and presented himself at the front door of his new neighbor, who, it turned out, was not only noisy, but also some kind of religious nut. Across the grape-stake fence at the front of the property stretched a plastic banner with letters several feet high saying: PREPARE! THE END IS NEAR.

The doorbell summoned a very large woman in a flowered shift, with—Hank was unsurprised to see—a marmoset on one shoulder, a parrot on the other. Hank introduced himself. The woman, smiling a welcome, conducted him through several virtually bare rooms giving off rank, zoo-ish smells, where eyes—lion cubs? jaguars? cougars?—stared in glassy concen-

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tration from shadowy corners, and on into the backyard where a man even larger than the large woman was at work on a scaffold which rose many feet into the air. The man had a substantial brush of black beard and a friendly, though glittering, eye. Hank saw that the scaffold enclosed some unidentifiable apparatus contained in a huge plastic bubble, with a steel ramp running through the scaffold and into a gaping hatch in the bubble's side. Hutches containing more pets—rabbits, raccoons, mongooses—were lined up in the remaining space.

The enormous man now identified himself and his wife as the Newmans. He handed Hank a triple bourbon in a water glass, and apologized for the noise. "But it won't go on much longer," he added. "I'm nearly finished."

"Oh, that's all right," Hank replied, with a curious feeling which he could identify only as that of something being out of place, or perhaps out of time. With something like admiration he watched Newman down his own triple drink and pour out another. "What is it, anyway, a spaceship?"

Newman laughed. "Nothing so simple," he declared, with what Hank now recognized as the implacable pride of the totally mad inventor. "For practical purposes we might call it a space-time converter, though that doesn't give the whole picture. What this machine is designed to do is—"

"No, wait," Hank said with the air of a man who manages to place a plug in the leaking dike only just in time. "Don't tell me. At least not now. I work for a newspaper, and I would like to come over again one of these weekends and do a feature on whatever you're making. Right now, though, I better try to get back to sleep. I have to go to work in a few hours."

"Well, don't wait too long," Newman said cheerfully. "About coming back, that is. We may not be here."

"But I thought you just moved in?"

Newman freshened both their drinks from the bottle, which he kept handy. Mrs. Newman had disappeared, either into the house or the bubble, Hank was not sure. "But not for long."

"No, of course not," Hank agreed, recalling the sign out front. "Because the end is coming."

"Right." Newman smiled. "Too much corruption in the world. Something's got to give."

"Uh-huh. So how will it come? Fire or ice?"

"Neither."

"Water?"

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Newman shook a shaggy head.

"I forgot extraterrestrial invasion. Is that it?"

The enormous man seemed to deliberate. Finally he said slowly, "Not in the way you might imagine. It will be a quiet kind of process. What will happen is—"

"No, no," Hank demurred again. "Save it for the interview."

For Hank now realized what was causing his sense of displacement, and his seemingly unprofessional reluctance was a natural reaction. It was simply that his days had suddenly and unaccountably begun collapsing into his nights so that the result was a twilit chaos. Heretofore any conversation he might have engaged in during the morning or afternoon hours was with relatively sane people, the waiter in the restaurant where he took his meals, the cleaning woman at his house, the laundry driver bringing his shirts. These encounters remained distinct and separate from his work-time conversations by telephone. As different as, say, day and night. Now, however, this dialogue with Newman, though it was taking place in the broad light of a winter morning, was actually a night sort of experience. Mr. Newman was a heavy drinker, to be sure, but his madness went deeper, according to Hank's expert judgment. This neighbor was in fact a night person (though he worked in the mornings), on the dark side of reason. As for the business of their not being around much longer, the Newmans, that was probably truer than they realized, Hank thought. Considering the number of city ordinances being violated by the Newman pets, not to mention that huge, provocative sign in a residential neighborhood, someone was sure to rout the whole menage soon. He would get on the interview on his very next day off, thoughtfully requesting the appointment at an evening hour, as more appropriate to the topic.

The call on his wacky neighbors had taken half an hour of Hank's sleeping time and, as he might have known would happen, one thing led to another so that he had not been able to return to his bed that day. In view of this, he was not ungrateful tonight for all the business the phone was giving him. At least it kept him awake and functioning.

"I've decided to level with you," the lobster fancier told Hank when he called still another time, "tell you about myself and all that."

"Yeah?" Hank encouraged him.

"I'm a high-school math

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teacher, retired and widowed, living alone out here in the suburbs, Oakwood Terrace. I've had my modest share of academic discipline on account of my occupation, you see; so I attempt to approach everything with an open mind, gathering data, trying to find out what makes things tick."

"Mmmm."

"Particularly, I abhor panic of any kind. It serves no purpose, and often prevents us from arriving at the correct answers. I guess I don't need to add that I also rule out supernatural occurrences of all varieties? There may be no irrefutable, immutable natural laws, but there *are* probabilities, and we must hold to them."

Hank yawned politely, one eye on the worsening storm, or what he could see of it past the reflection of the interior of the news room on the windows. (Had the Newmans remembered to get all their pets under shelter?) The weather would be this evening's banner, then. BLIZZARD HITS RANCEFORD, in wooden type, with a drop head: EMERGENCY SNARLS TRAFFIC, CAUSES POWER FAILURES. "Uh-huh," Hank said into the phone.

"It is because of these convictions that I'm rejecting the sensory data presented to me out in my yard just now."

"How's that?"

"As you must know, virtually no one is abroad in this weather. About an hour ago, however, I was forced out of doors because I had neglected to cover the motor of my car with a blanket. You see, I have my garage filled with power tools, and the car has to sit out. It won't start mornings in bad weather unless the ignition wires have been kept covered."

"I see," said Hank, his glance wandering back over the open almanac. He noted that in 1876 ninety-two people died in a train accident at Ashtabula, Ohio.

"I had wrapped up the car and turned to re-enter my backdoor when I imagined—I say, I *imag*ined, for I don't for a moment believe it happened—that an egg fell out of the sky, struck the earth at my feet, and split on impact."

"An egg?"

"Well, now you mention it, I'm not sure. I *think* it was an egg I imagined. Anyway, it was a container of some kind, made of a resilient, milk-colored material, somewhat rubbery. I suppose I used the word 'egg' because, after it split open, an animal emerged. That is, I imagined it did. The hallucination was especially vivid."

"What kind of animal?"

"I thought I told you earlier. A lobster."

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"Homard or langouste?"

"Well, it had four small legs on either side of a long, segmented body, with antennae and a large pair of claws at the front."

"Homard," Hank decided. It just might, he thought, be an occasion calling for a few notes, though note taking was something he had fallen out of the habit of; his night callers, interesting as they sometimes were to himself, were never really grist for sober, daytime copy. However, he took up a handful of newsprint half-sheets, and after setting down the words "hallucinatory egg from sky—milk-colored—rubbery," he doodled a sketch of a lobster (homard). "How big?"

"I'm getting to that. After it was born, or released, or whatever, I imagined it stretched out till it seemed about two feet long, but then almost immediately it began to divide at the center. That is, I imagined all this. The two halves grew new appendages on the severed sides, and in no time—about three minutes, I judge—they divided, I imagined. It was like watching one of those movies of plants pushing through the soil and finally blooming and then fading away, the effect you get from speeding up a film reel, you know?"

Hank let the pencil drop back onto the desk, crumpled his notes, and pushed them aside. Nothing here after all. The man was as mad as all the rest of them.

"I've done some calculations," the math teacher went on modestly, "which indicate that if the creatures had been real, and not figments of my mind, and if they kept multiplying at the current rate, they would occupy a square mile of space in about two hours. This is assuming they all took a position flat on the ground, which in reality wouldn't be the case. Actually they'd pile up, and their combined weight would exert a tremendous pressure per square inch against vertical surfaces. Nor would I have any assurance, if all this were really happening, that the egg which came down in my own yard was the only one. I could just as easily have imagined eggs, or whatever they are, falling all over town, or for that matter, all over the world. By now, of course, I'm back in my house, but the hallucination still has a tremendous hold on my mind. I can still imagine those lobsters piling up out there in the yard, pressing in on the windows and doors, the walls. It's like a nightmare. I—"

But here the voice was cut off by the sound of a dull, faraway explosion, like dy-

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namite set off in a well, or a bookcase falling down. Then there was no voice, no dial tone, nothing.

Hank's first concern was that some heavy object had indeed toppled onto the math teacher, who would now be lying unconscious, needing help. He jiggled the phone, and this time got a dial tone. Retrieving his crumpled notes with the idea of calling the police and sending them to the stricken man, Hank discovered he had gotten no name. (A professional blunder, but how could he have known he'd need one?) Or telephone number. Oakwood Terrace, had the caller said?

He abandoned the telephone and riffled helplessly through the directory, then frantically picked up the instrument again to dial the operator on the chance the call might yet be traced, possibly by the repair service, for surely the math instructor's receiver had not been properly replaced. But now a new problem. Hank's telephone too seemed dead. The storm, of course. He tried each of the five lines into the news room; they were all equally useless. So it was the storm which had done for the lobster man's phone too. A limb, heavy with snow, fallen over a wire?

At least the electricity was still on, the wire machine still tapping away. In fact, the keys seemed to be clicking faster than ever. Hank went over to look and arrived in time to see the machine bang out the word FLASH. And then stop dead. He waited, but nothing followed. He decided it must have been an error about the FLASH. The wire news which poured into the *Trump* all night was from the state service for small dailies. Most of it was background copy and columns. In Hank's experience there had been very few FLASHes, even in the daytime, news-making hours. FLASH: CONGRESS DECLARES WAR. And FLASH: FDR DEAD. But most news came in under the more relaxed heading BULLETIN. He toyed a moment with the idea of calling the wire office long distance and asking what the hell, before he remembered the telephones were out of service.

One thing he might do, though, just in case the accident to the math teacher's telephone had *not* been storm-caused (because how can one be sure of anything, after all?): he could get on the teletype keyboard himself, ask them about the aborted FLASH, then tell them a man might be in trouble somewhere in the Oakwood Terrace section of Ranceford, and let someone in the central wire office call the Ranceford police about it.

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But as he approached the sending unit of the wire machine, he suddenly noticed how utterly still the news room had become. Not only had the machine not disgorged the promised FLASH, it had stopped pulsating, even stopped humming. Could he have unplugged it by stepping on the cord? He checked switch, cord, and mysterious inner works, the last by removing a metal plate. Storm, Hank thought again. Next thing to go would be the lights. He had no sooner given shape to the thought than the electricity did fail, leaving the room sunk in a soupy obscurity without a splinter of light from anywhere, for the street-lamps had of course gone too.

Mild-mannered Hank swore a little as he groped his way back to his desk, but otherwise he was not upset. He would simply have to make the best of the remainder of the night, without books, without even the possibility of a diverting call from an interesting eccentric. His only real regret was that he hadn't glanced at the electric wall clock while he could still see it; he had no idea what time it was and not only was he without a watch with a luminous dial, he was without any kind. He had never owned one.

Assuming it had been around one o'clock when the first lobster call came, then surely two hours had passed since. Anyway, making the best of things now, it seemed, would mean trying to get some rest. He could bumble around the room for the rest of the night if he chose, going from desk to desk feeling for folders of matches. On the other hand the storm might keep some of the regular staff home when morning came, or at least make them late, and Hank would surely be obliged to work on through the day. So he might as well prepare himself with all the sleep he could get. Still groping, he removed the papers and in-out baskets from his own desk and that of the real-estate editor next to it. He shoved the two desks together. The result wasn't exactly what could be called a bed, but he was up off the drafty floor, and after he had covered his head and shoulders with his jacket—discovered on the back of his chair after more groping—he felt a little better than downright miserable. He dropped off while saying over to himself the cabinet appointments of Rutherford B. Hayes. Then some time later he dreamed, not unpleasantly, of the imaginary lobsters. He was at his desk and happened to look out the window, and there they were, multiplying like crazy—by fission yet. Bodies tumbled over one another with a clashing of

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carapaces, stacking up with tremendous pressure against the walls of the *Trump* building. When the sea of living animals grew high enough, it began to spill in through a window in the hall which Hank had forgotten was open. Hank woke up.

Now even the radiators no longer whispered. It had grown cold in the news room, and the combination of chill air and the hard surface he had slept on stiffened all Hank's muscles. But he sighed, feeling somewhat refreshed despite all, and began to plan his day. First, before he even rose to a sitting posture, he tried the phone on the side of his desk. Still dead. Though the dark seemed as dense as ever, it was undoubtedly going on for morning, time for the wire editor to arrive. Or if he didn't, held up by the storm, Hank would cut up what wire had come over before the power failure and mark it up for the backshop.

For this he would need a light, at least until the winter dawn came. Remembering there had once been a battery camp lantern in the sports editor's locker, he fumbled his way back to the other side of the room and opened each locker to feel inside. The remembered lantern was, surprisingly, there.

Through it all, Hank remained true to his profession, not even once imagining that the *Trump* might not come out that evening. Newspapers went on no matter what. No disaster vast enough to interrupt their function was thinkable.

He had cut up the wire stuff and was looking over the tentative day's budget of stories on the desk of the day city editor when he heard a welcome scuttling-squashing sound in the hall which could be made by only one thing: the flapping buckles of the wire editor's overshoes. And if the wire man had arrived, most of the others would too. After all, they came in cars, and some early crew would already have plowed out the streets; maybe it had even stopped snowing.

Hank picked up the camp lantern and pointed its beam at the open door into the hall, sorting through the hodgepodge of irrelevant information in his brain for an appropriate quip. When no one appeared, he moved nearer with the light. "That you, Joe?" he finally said.

No one answered, and if, in the moments to follow, around the corner of the doorframe had been projected a brackish claw, or the first wash of a rising tide, Hank Backstay, overjoyed, would have sat down to the nearest typewriter to prepare the story which, he would still imagine, might change his luck. □

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Bruce McAllister, whose last story here, "Ecce Femina," apparently raised a few hackles among our woman readers, returns with another strong story, this one concerning a deaf-mute with a unique talent for making broken things whole again.

Triangle

by BRUCE McALLISTER

STILL SHAKING FROM THE near-accident twenty minutes before, the younger boy got out of the pickup, walked over to the cyclone fence, hooked his fingers into the chain link, and began staring in at the dump—at the three figures near the little shack. His brother slipped slowly from the driver's seat and was talking even before he reached the fence.

Carl had heard it all before—all about the deaf-mute who watched over the dump. But he hadn't *seen* the deaf-mute in years, and only once back then. So he stared through the fence and let his brother think he was listening.

"So mom says to dad real loud, 'I tell you, George, you're not taking the boys there any more. It's just not right to expose them to a mind like that!' "

Carl nodded, and the voice droned on in his ear while he watched the slightly hunched figure jump up and down in front of the other two figures, a man and a woman.

"See, mom had heard from Mrs. Davis in Barclay about how the mutie attacked John Bates and his brother and three other guys who weren't doing nothing to the mutie or the dump or anything."

"Yeah, Pete," Carl said without moving his nose from the cold metal of the fence, "I remember that."

"Yeah, well, you see the nice things he's got there by his shack?"

Carl squinted at the shack—the ramshackle box of boards and sheets of corrugated metal. Behind the jumping deaf-mute, leaning against the shack's walls, were many different

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items that looked in good shape, some freshly painted. Further away from the shack, in increasingly larger rings around it—with some of the rings falling on the nearest mounds of the dump itself—were endless numbers of true dump things—broken this, bent that, things Carl couldn't quite make out.

As he squinted now—in one of his older brother's rare moments of silence—it seemed to Carl that this deaf-mute who was supposedly unable to speak was actually making a noise. A sound through his nose almost, like a pig—excited, but not angry or threatening.

"Can't you see them?" Pete was impatient, poking him in the shoulder.

"Yeah, sure I see them."

"Well, he steals those things."

Carl turned in surprise. "Who says? I thought he took old broken things and fixed them up so they'd look new."

"You kidding? Dad says they're *too* new. Says no man can fix up old things to look like that. And besides, why would anyone go around trading things he just finished fixing for old broken things?"

Carl had turned back. He didn't know what to think. He was watching the deaf-mute, who was silent now, hand one of the "new things" to the well-dressed man. It looked like a big floor lamp. In turn, the man immediately handed the deaf-mute a small piece of furniture, a chest of drawers. The deaf-mute was no longer jumping up and down, but was nodding violently. The two well-dressed "customers" turned to leave.

He still didn't know what to think. He had only seen the deaf-mute once, when he was five years old, and he couldn't remember the deaf-mute as looking like this, or acting like this. But the facts were, he supposed, clear enough against the deaf-mute: their father had long ago stopped taking them with him to the dump, because of the mute's suddenly bad reputation. The mutie—in his jumping up and down and nodding and oinking—did probably have some violence in him, enough to attack John Bates and his brother and three other boys. But there were equally bad things said about John Bates' reputation. . . .

The man and woman were passing close by now, on their way out through the one gate in the cyclone fence. He didn't have to listen hard. The couple had no reason to keep their voices low, and their backs were turned to the lip reader in the distance.

"—in mint condition!" the man was saying, interrupting

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the woman and laughing. "Deaf and dumb, as they say—cliches always have a touch of truth."

"Charles, listen to me. The Truesdales in Sacramento are willing to pay up to three hundred for a DeClair if. . . ."

The woman's voice trailed off as they turned outside the gate, heading toward their car. He could hear them both laughing now, could see their heads bobbing in laughter. He looked back to the deaf-mute, and found the hunched-over figure still watching the couple, staring at their backs. . .at their bobbing heads.

"Oh, boy," his brother said suddenly, hooking his fingers into the fence and striking a pose of staring at the deaf-mute.

The figure, dark now against the pale side of the shack, turned to look at them. The older boy stuck out his lower jaw and continued staring, staring back.

Carl looked down, wondering why his brother was like this. Was it the new driver's license? Or something else. . .? He often acted like this when he was with Terry and Josh, but they weren't here now—wouldn't be back for three days. Maybe Pete acted this way because he wanted to be with Terry and Josh, which he would have been, if he hadn't gotten the flu two days before his two best friends left with Terry's dad for Yosemite. Terry's dad had said Pete could drive part of the way, and Pete had been planning on it. But Terry's dad couldn't have known how badly Pete drove. But then maybe Pete would have been more careful—with Terry's dad in the car—and not missed fences by two or three inches at sixty miles an hour.

The memory made him start shaking again. He could see the fence whipping by so close to his face—the window of the car door giving him no feeling of protection whatsoever.

He turned his head and found his brother jumping up and down, scratching his armpits like an ape, staring at the deaf-mute. The deaf-mute hadn't moved. He remained frozen, still staring at them.

His brother was jumping up and down even harder now, grunting like a pig, chattering like a chimpanzee he'd seen on TV, and finally laughing, then grunting again, chattering, laughing again.

Carl reached out, grabbed his brother by the sleeve. "Hey, don't!"

Pete turned his head—but not his eyes, which he kept on the deaf-mute.

"Shut up, Carl! Can't you see I'm *talking* to the mutie?"

Carl looked back at the figure and saw it cock its head.

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"Come on," he tried again, "I'm hungry. You said we could get something at Blue's!"

"All right, all right."

His brother stopped. He sighed, shook his head, and looking up at the sky briefly in a gesture Carl had often seen their father make, muttered, "Jesus Christ, why aren't *they* here?"

They headed back to the pickup, Carl trailing. He glanced back once.

The figure watched them leave, waited until the dust kicked up by the pickup's tires had settled back down again, before he turned and headed slowly toward the shack, to the side—hidden from road's view—where the day's new acquisitions rested.

By the time he reached the shack, he was less hunched over. His back was straighter despite the heavy rounded shoulders, and his broad chin was carried higher. With a flip of his big head he sent the hair flying back out of his face and eyes.

Knitting a tanned brow, he stepped among the new items, leaned down, and began touching them, stroking them, rubbing them with harsh hands. He touched the remaining wires on the twisted birdcage, hefted for a moment the steam iron with the fractured black-plastic handle, rubbed the ceramic curves of the lamp with the broken base and exposed wiring, and stroked the shattered, peeling face of the tiny chest of drawers, its twenty layers of paint and loose frame.

When he had touched in some manner every last item, he rose from his crouch. The sweat was already beginning to pour from his muscles, to drench his red flannel shirt and baggy pants. He was ready.

He walked to the nearest mound of the dump and began gathering what he needed—three loose spokes from a bicycle wheel, a heavy black-plastic handle from something long-since lost, a larger sliver of rough walnut, and the driest pieces of the *right* kinds of cloth and rubber he could find.

With the items in arm, he carried them back to the day's new acquisitions, dropped them in a separate pile, and then hurried inside the shack. A moment later he returned clenching in one hand a small metal thing.

He looked around once—squinting particularly in the direction of the gate—and squatted down near the two piles of objects. He selected an object from each—the iron with the fractured handle, and the heavy black-plastic handle—and placed them side by side on the ground in front of him.

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Tightening his fist even harder around the small metal thing, he took a last look at the iron with the broken handle and at the perfect handle, and closed his eyes.

At his brown temples the muscles began to bulge. Under the red flannel the sweat was flowing more freely. The tip of his tongue was showing at the corner of his mouth.

In his mind's eye he saw the scales begin to tip.

He relaxed, opened his eyes, and without looking at the two objects on the ground near him, made two new selections from the piles: the ceramic lamp with the broken base and exposed wiring, and the pieces of rubber and cloth.

When he had them side by side on the ground, the small metal object again tight in his fist, he closed his eyes and concentrated again. And again he stopped when his mind's eye showed him the tipping scales.

His eyes opened, and without looking at the lamp or cloth and rubber, he turned to the iron and the handle, squinted at them, inspecting them.

The iron's handle was nearly filled in. Only hairline cracks and one small hole were left. Beside the iron the handle-from-something lay twisted and a little smaller.

Wiping the sweat from his brow, he closed his eyes, clenched his fist, concentrated on the iron and the handle again, and finally opened his eyes—to look back at the lamp and the rubber and cloth.

The rubber and cloth did not appear shrunken, but the lamp's wiring was no longer frayed. The work that remained for him was the simple job of repairing the lamp's ceramic base.

He concentrated. When he was finished, he turned back to the iron, and found that its handle had completely healed by now.

When he finished with the fifth new item of the day—a tricycle run over by a car or truck, sunken into itself like a crushed spider—he stopped. He was not finished, but he was exhausted. His fingers ached and had barely enough strength to hold the little metal thing as he went inside the shack and sat down slowly at a narrow table with long legs.

He stared at the pair of old brass scales on the table, then stroked the well-worn stand and returned the little weight from his hand to the proper side of the scales. The scales tipped, and he watched them, fascinated. Then he put his head down on the table and licked the saltiness from his lips, but did not close his eyes.

Droplets of sweat coursed down his temples. A ray of light

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from a crack in the shack's wall somehow slipped between his arm and head, illuminating the table directly under his eyes. Finally, he closed his eyes, and a sudden wind, from the crack in the wall, cooled his quivering flesh into silence and brief sleep.

The pickup smelled of French fries, and his brother was trying to lick a speck of Blue's "special sauce" from the corner of his mouth.

Carl didn't turn—keeping his eyes hard on the road ahead—when his brother spoke.

"You won't tell dad about the fence, will you?"

"No." Carl sighed. "I *promise.*"

But he wanted to tell someone—because he thought he should. And Pete knew it; he started muttering.

"Why are you so goddamn upset about it, anyway?"

Carl still didn't turn. It was not going to happen again, if he could help it. But it would probably happen again if Pete didn't stop turning and looking at him and waiting for answers—

"Please watch where you're driving, okay?"

Air whistled through Pete's teeth. He sighed, and out of the corner of his eye Carl could see that he was shaking his head again. Pete was getting mad again, just because Carl wouldn't say to him, "You can come as close as you want to hitting any fence you want—it doesn't bother me—I'm no chicken." Just because Carl wasn't like Terry or Josh. . . .

There was a clicking sound on the floor near Pete's feet, and the pickup gathered speed.

From the corner of his eye Carl thought he could see a smile on his brother's face. The truck was still accelerating.

"Come on!" Carl said, pleading, but softly.

He glanced quickly over at the speedometer and then put his eyes back on the road. Pete was going to make a turn sometime—to give him a big scare, the biggest yet—but where, when how would he make the turn?

They were passing the Darlings' almond groves now. The next turn would be the one to Minor, half a mile down the road. But Pete might not take that one—he might wind out toward Barclay and take the Atwater turnoff instead.

The Minor turnoff was close now. They had made this turn—with their father driving—a thousand times before. . . . Every time, the white short-hair mongrel with the one blue eye and the one brown would rush from the Wheelen place at the corner and leap and snap at the tires of the pickup.

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Carl wasn't worried. Even if Pete was going to take this turnoff, he knew about the dog; he had seen it nipping and snapping at the tires as many if not more times than Carl had.

"Hey, Carl."

Carl turned automatically and found his brother staring at him.

He waited for Pete to look back at the road, but Pete didn't—wouldn't. The time began to stretch out, to slow down, as he waited, as Pete refused—yes, refused with a smile on his face—to look back at the road, to keep his eyes on the road.

Pete glanced once quickly at the road but then turned back to stare at Carl. Grinning.

Suddenly they were at the turnoff. The flash of white was instantly in the road, and Pete was turning, turning early, close to the fence, turning without looking.

Carl had heard it on TV. It sounded just the same. The thump, the whine, the screeching of tires.

The pickup swerved, slowed, bumped and came to rest against the fence.

He opened his eyes and found Pete shaking, hands tight on the steering wheel and looking at him—no, past him.

Carl turned and found what his brother was looking at. The Wheelens' driveway was empty; both the camper and the pickup were gone. No one was around to see what had happened or to come out and find out.

Pete was out of the pickup, leaning over now.

Carl got out, moved to his brother's side, and looked down at the dog. It looked slightly deflated, like a balloon. But there wasn't any blood.

"Maybe he's not dead," Carl found himself whispering. The breeze was almost louder than his own voice.

His brother prodded the dog's stomach with his boot and then jerked the boot clear. Blood had started oozing from the black-lipped mouth.

Carl turned to squint at his brother's face and found him no longer shaking.

"Hell," Pete began, "it wasn't my fault. Dad and Uncle Ed and all the people at the Feed—everybody always said he was going to get hit someday!"

Pete hesitated, seeming to wait for an answer. Carl said nothing—didn't know what answer his brother wanted, didn't want to give Pete any answer of any kind.

"And I remember Uncle Ed saying that if it was him that hit it, he hoped it died quick."

Pete was nodding to himself now as he spoke, as if supplying his own answers.

"Yeah, and I killed it quick all right. No whining. No

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blood—practically. Look at it."

His brother was looking at him now, asking. "Right? So we don't have to tell nobody about it, do we."

Carl shook his head slowly, then changed to a nod—unsure what the right gesture was. But Pete wasn't looking at him any more.

Pete was kneeling down, staring at the body again.

"Kind of eerie, isn't it? Not really that much blood, but it's dead. Kind of like an old person dies, more than anything else. Like something's broken that you can't see."

Carl became aware that he was still nodding. He stopped.

"In fact. . . ." his brother was saying.

His brother was up, the smile back on his face again, the last bit of shaking gone, somehow unaware now of Carl's presence—of the possibility that Carl still might tell on him if he didn't start acting right. He didn't like the look on Pete's face. He didn't like the feeling, of being forgotten.

"You better not be planning on—" Pete began, but his brother wasn't listening, and he wanted Carl to listen.

"In fact, I'll bet the *mutie* can fix this poor dog. He's so good at fixing things. I bet he'd just love to work on this poor dead broken-down doggie."

Pete was heading toward the back of the truck and laughing.

Carl wanted to ask why, but he didn't. He wanted, needed, to say something—but he could find only one weak thing to say.

"Blood'll get all over the blanket and dad'll see it and—"

His brother laughed, was already laughing. He had one of the "Indian" blankets out of the pickup's bed and was heading back toward the dog.

"No problem," he shouted back at Carl. "I'll say we were parked at Blue's, and someone must have stole the blanket for a joke—some friend of mine must have stole it."

Carl got back in the cab of the truck and waited. There was the sound of grunting and bumping, and then a thump, and finally a sliding sound, after which his brother soon slipped into the cab.

His brother began whistling. He was whistling seven miles later when another pickup passed them, and the driver of the other truck waved, and Pete waved back proudly.

He was still whistling when they reached the dump's open gate near dusk. He got out, walked toward the shack to check, and quickly returned to the bed of the pickup.

Carl could hear him continue his whistling as he carried the heavy bundle toward the shack.

And Pete was laughing—

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laughing harder than Carl had ever heard him laugh before—when he returned from the shack empty-armed and got inside the cab again.

"We still got two hours," Pete announced grinning, "before we got to get home."

The figure came back. A few of the mounds were still burning behind him, but most had died down. As he wove his way back to the shack on a path of ashless, fireless dirt, he glanced again and again on either side of him at the trash smoldering like agonized fiery worms.

At the shack's door he stopped, sniffed at the air, looked once at the gate, and went inside.

He saw what was on the table and stopped and began staring at the body.

Finally, he walked over to the table and began looking over the dog, inspecting it. Its whip-like tail was resting on the brass scales. He wiped his hands slowly on his shirt and then lifted the tail from the scales, curling it gently down between the dog's legs. Then he sat down and began again to stare at the body, then again to inspect it.

His hands moved to the animal's side and started to *know* it—to touch the loose flesh at its throat and the rubbery black lips oiled with blood, to stroke the hard brow of the one blue eye and the one brown, to pat thoroughly the pliant white flanks.

Then he took the small weight from the scales, hesitated, and put it back.

Elbows on the table, he stared. He looked up once to look at—or through—the wall . . . in the direction of the gate and the place where cars usually parked. Then he resumed his staring at the body.

The dog was stiff and very cold when he awoke from his stare. The blood on the black lips was dry, caked, and the lips were pulled back as if by wires. His hand was still on the animal's side; it had been there all through his staring.

He stared for a moment at his hand, at his fingers, and keeping them where they were—on the dog's ripply ribs—he reached for the little weight with his other hand, clenched it in his fist immediately, and closed his eyes.

His mind's eye saw the scales.

The scales began tipping—away from his hand, but toward *what* he could not be sure. His mind's eye simply could not see the other side of the scales very well at all.

He made no sound, but he heard his own scream just the same.

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When he opened his eyes, his own teeth were bared, the sweat was pouring like oil from his forehead, and his left arm—the one with the hand on the dog's side—was twitching in mad bursts of energy. He looked at the pained arm, and it calmed a little.

The two fingers farthest from the thumb of his left hand were twisted and shriveled. They had changed color and were almost purplish, with splotches of blue.

But the palm of that hand felt only coldness beneath it. He pressed down with the palm and still felt no throb, no hint of warmth.

Shaking his damaged hand gingerly, he got up and walked to the door, opened it and looked out with wide eyes at the night.

Walking slowly to the gate, he locked it and returned to the shack, glancing back once as if planning to find a car or truck parked under the towering eucalyptus by the fence. But there were no cars. The shadows under the tree were blue and empty. The only light anywhere was the dim yellow glow from the shack.

Back on the shack's rickety porch, he looked again into the darkness, and his face began changing. His eyes narrowed. His jaw tightening, the muscles rippling at the edge of his cheeks. His nostrils flared, and his throat made one quick sound which he could not hear.

Turning quickly, he entered the shack, strode over to the dog, lifted it easily in his arms, and carried it outside, the little weight again back in his hand.

He set the body on the ground, looked at it, and closed his eyes.

Instantly his eyes were open again, as he got down on the ground, on his knees, closer to the ground. Then his eyes closed again.

The scales seemed somehow bigger now, and this was understandable to him.

The effort required to tip them—even to begin to tip them—would be tremendous, as he had known all his life it would be.

But in the end it was easier than his mind's eye had predicted. The scales began tipping. Away from him. Toward the windy blue cold of a white figure somewhere, somewhere near him because, yes, because he had put the hairy white form there, on the ground, near him.

The scales tipped further.

He was falling. But not too far. He hit, and continued falling, the scales tipping away, above him, up and out from where he was, which was now turning windy and blue.

It became frightening only

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when he began to lose his ability to *see* things—scales, wind, the white form now growing yellow-warmer near him, but not near enough to warm him. It was hard to accept this formless blue cold where he was now, where he couldn't see, but somehow he was beginning to accept it very well—

Then, an interruption.

He could not see, but he still could feel—in this cold and blue—that the wind had suddenly changed, from cold to warm, and there was a wetness—not like sweatiness, but like a sprinkling of rain, and color like the brightest brass in the most-middle of the day, and—

It didn't matter, couldn't matter—he wanted, needed, the scales to tip all the way away from him! What was getting in the way? The scales had not tipped far enough yet, and he wanted them to. The white form was not quite warm enough yet. So he tried more. To tip them. Away. From him. To the white. Warming. Form.

The interruption persisted. It was not clear, but it was strong. And then suddenly the scales became something else, a thing like scales but somehow different, with three weights, and a dazzle-eye, and a—

The scales tipped—just as he wanted them to. Away from him, toward the white—but something else too, another tipping, elsewhere, which his own tipping was causing, toward himself, away from—

There was no understanding it. He was simply not the one controlling this—no, not at all—

He awoke, and it was not raining. And it was still night.

He looked up, and the dog was gone.

He got up, swayed, and stumbled toward the shack. When he reached the porch he fell, struggled to his feet, glanced over at the fence—near the fence—and saw something move in the blueness.

Squinting, he still could not be sure. But it did look like a pale dog, a dog lifting its leg against the fence.

He started toward it, stumbling.

It saw him, backed away from the fence, and in one motion was scrambling up and over the fence.

He stared. It was gone.

A sudden wind, like a chest throb somehow, was warm around him.

Carl stared up through the shattered door window of the pickup, his back against the opposite door, and tried again to stop crying. His chest hurt, and his crying only hurt it more.

He tried to understand where they might be, but he

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couldn't even remember the last turnoff they'd taken.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see the top of his brother's head, right below his face. His brother was on top of him, but he could not feel him. He did not want to feel him. His brother had not moved or moaned in all the time they had been there, ever since the pickup left the road and never regained its balance.

He did not want to look, either. He was afraid of redness. He was afraid there might be redness oozing from Pete's—

No, he would not think about it. He would think about cars—about *when* someone would come. He had heard only two cars pass, and they had been in the distance. And night had arrived since he had awakened. No lights. Far from the road.

He did not understand it. And as he thought about it, he realized that his mother and father would not understand it either. Someone would surely say to him, "You were in the passenger's seat, the 'death seat,' and nothing happened to you! *He* was driving, and he was the one who—"

Why? His brother should have been moving—should have been blinking and crying just like he was. Why wasn't he? Why was he, Carl, the one who was—

I am alive. He is. . . .

His eyes became traitors. They looked down. They looked and saw the face—the head twisted, the skin as white as the underside of a frog's leg, the hair almost glowing in the green light from the radio. There wasn't any blood oozing from the mouth, but there was blood on the forehead.

His eyes looked down but found no blood oozing between their bodies.

His eyes obeyed him and closed. He had never held his brother before; as far as he could remember, his brother had never held him, unless it had been when Carl was a baby.

His arms were already around his brother. He pulled in on them slowly and held on tightly, waiting, wondering why, hoping *they* would understand.

He opened his eyes once to stare up at the deeper darkness and felt the terrible cold wind throbbing like thunder. □

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ISAAC ASIMOV

SCIENCE

THE CLOCK IN THE SKY

YEARS AGO, AT A PARTY, I was introduced to a tallish fellow with unruly hair and a somehow pointed face. The words of the introduction were "John Updike—Isaac Asimov."

I thought furiously. There was no hint in the introduction as to whether it was *the* John Updike, the writer. If it were he, I felt I had better say something appropriately modest, as befitted a second-class writer greeting a first-class one. If it were some other John Updike, a used-car dealer, for all I knew, it would be incredibly embarrassing to be caught pulling my forelock.

Updike (for it was he, the writer) had no such problem, of course. Anyone with the name Isaac Asimov has to be the writer—so while I was still hesitating, he said, with a distinct note of awe in his voice, "Say, how do you write all those books?"

I was left with the grim feeling that I had arrogantly let him make the first advance. Nothing I could do after that helped.

I made up my mind to get in the appropriately humble remarks *first* the very next time I met a well-known writer. Three

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days later, only three, I saw Max Shulman, the humorist, at another party. I had never met him before but recognized him from photographs I had seen of him.

I hastened toward him and began with ingratiating humility, "Mr. Shulman, may I introduce myself? My name is Isaac Asi—"

And he said, with a distinct note of awe in his voice, "Say, how do you write all those books?"

I gave up. I want to be humble but the world won't let me. And it keeps asking me the same question, too.

In science, the question I get asked more than any other—over and over, in person, by phone, by letter—is, "How can you be *sure* things can't go faster than light?"

Well, I've answered that question in this magazine more than once (IMPOSSIBLE, THAT'S ALL, February 1967; THE LUXON WALL, December 1969), and I won't go into it again. The previous explanations didn't stop the question and another one won't either.

Instead, I'll take up another aspect of the matter. How was the speed of light determined in the first place? In fact, what made people think that light had some definite speed in the zeroth place?

If, in ancient times, people thought at all of the notion of a speed to light, it must have been with the feeling that the speed was infinite. If light appeared, it appeared everywhere at once. If the clouds broke and the Sun pierced the veil that hid its glory, you didn't see light making its way down the avenue of the atmosphere, hitting a mountain peak first and rolling down the mountainside like a stream of water. It hit the valley as quickly as the peak.

What must first have shaken the notion of the infinite speed of light was the matter of sound. Light and sound were the two great avenues to the outside world. The eye saw and the ear heard, and both sound and light were casually assumed to do their work honestly. If you saw something in the distance, it was really in the place you saw it at the moment you saw it. And if you heard something in the distance, it was really in the place you heard it at the moment you heard it.

At moderate distances this was true enough for practical purposes, but as distance increased, the two senses fell noticeably out of step. Sound suffered a delay. If you watched a man chopping wood, for instance, the sight of contact of axe and wood

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and the sound of contact should come together—and did, if you were close. At a distance, however, the sound comes after the sight and the greater the distance, the greater the lag.

It was clear from that alone that whether the speed of light was infinite or not, the speed of sound was clearly *not* infinite. It took time for sound to travel; that was abundantly clear to the senses. And if sound travelled at a finite speed, why not light as well?

If the speed of sound was not infinite, it was nevertheless quite large. In the lapse between the sight of a distant action and its accompanying sound, nothing material known to the men of the pre-industrial age could possibly have covered the distance. Sound clearly travelled hundreds of miles an hour.

(It wasn't till about 1738 that the speed of sound was measured with reasonable precision. French scientists set up cannons on hills some seventeen miles apart. They fired the cannon upon one hill and timed the interval between flash and sound on the other hill. Then they fired the other cannon and timed the interval between flash and sound on the first. The time lapse in the two cases was averaged in order that the effect of the wind might be cancelled—for it was known that sound was carried by the motions of air molecules. With the distance between the cannon known, and the time lapse measured, the speed of sound could be calculated. It turns out that the speed of sound in air at 0° C.—the speed goes up with temperature and is different in other media—is 740 miles an hour, or 331 meters per second.)

Since sound lagged markedly behind light, it was clear that light had to travel at speeds much greater than mere hundreds of miles per hour. The speed of light should therefore be much harder to measure than that of sound.

Nevertheless, with a kind of gallantry above and beyond the call of duty, the Italian scientist, Galileo, tried to measure the speed of light in the early 1600s.

The method he used was as follows:

Galileo placed himself on an elevation and had an assistant climb to another elevation about a mile away. Both carried shielded lanterns. The idea was that Galileo would unshield his lantern. As soon as the assistant saw the flash of light that followed the unshielding, he was to unshield his own light.

Galileo reasoned thus. He would unshield his light, and the beam would take a certain time to travel to the other peak. When it came, the assistant would flash his light, and again it would take a certain time to travel back to Galileo. The time between the

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moment that Galileo flashed his light and the moment that he saw his assistant's light would represent the time it took light to travel from one elevation to the other elevation and back.

Knowing the distance between the elevations, and measuring the time lapse, Galileo would then have put himself into the position of being able to calculate the speed of light.

There *was* a short time lapse, and for a moment things looked hopeful, but then Galileo tried other distances, expecting that the time lapse would increase in proportion to the distance—and it did not. It stayed the same, however short or long the distance between the lanterns was. We can be quite sure that if Galileo and his assistant were standing six feet apart, there would be just the same time lapse between Galileo's flash and his sight of the assistant's flash as when they were a mile apart—or ten thousand miles apart.

It was clear that the interval of time Galileo was measuring did not represent the time it took for light to travel from A to B and back to A, but only the time it took his assistant to realize he had seen a flash and to then make his muscles move so as to produce the return flash. Galileo was measuring the speed of human reaction and not the speed of light at all.

From the fact that there was no change in the time-lapse with distance, Galileo had to conclude that the time it took the light beam to travel did not contribute perceptibly to the result. The speed of light could not be measured in this fashion, because it was so much greater than that of sound. The speed of light might even be infinite for anything Galileo could tell from his attempt at measurement.

If light were travelling *very* quickly, then even if its speed were not infinite, no Earthly distance might suffice to produce a perceptible delay in light propagation. Heavenly distances might, though. If someone could climb into the sky instead of going to another hill and turn a star on and off on command, the interval between the command and seeing the star go on (or off) would represent the time it took for light to make the round trip.

Alas for the brilliant idea. No one in Galileo's time knew how far away any heavenly body (except the Moon) was. Even if the distances of the heavenly bodies were known, no one could reach them (not even the Moon). Even if someone could reach them, how could one communicate over such long distances and give the command to turn a star off. And even if one could communicate, how would one turn a star off?

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Moonshine! Moonshine!

Except that that (or almost that) is exactly what happened. The speed of light was first determined by a method that was precisely analogous to turning a star on and off at a signal. And it began with a discovery by Galileo. And it *was* moonshine, literally moonshine.*

First: Galileo's discovery.

In 1609, he had received rumors that far off in the Netherlands somebody had placed lenses at either end of a hollow tube and had succeeded in making distant things appear nearer. Galileo needed no further hint. In almost no time, he had a similar device of his own—a telescope.

Immediately, he turned it on the heavens. He saw mountains on the Moon, and spots on the Sun, and crowds of invisible-stars-made-visible in the constellations.

On January 9, 1610, he looked at Jupiter, and through the telescope it seemed like a small globe rather than a mere dot of light. Near it, on either side, and in the same straight line, were three small star-like objects. On January 13, he saw a fourth.

He watched them, night after night, and it became clear that each one of them was moving back and forth from one side of Jupiter to the other, each one receding a fixed distance on either side. It was impossible not to realize what one was seeing. Jupiter was being circled by four smaller bodies, each in its own orbit. And all four orbits were being seen edge-on from Earth.

Galileo announced his discovery at once and the contemporary German astronomer, Johannes Kepler, named the small bodies that were circling Jupiter, "satellites." This was from a Latin term for parasites who constantly circled some rich man and flattered him in order to be invited to his dinners.

The four satellites were named after characters in the Greek myths who were closely related to Jupiter (or Zeus, to be more accurate). These were, in order of increasing distance from Jupiter: Io, Europa, Ganymede and Callisto. These names were suggested by a German astronomer, Simon Marius, who claimed he had seen the satellites before Galileo had. Marius' claim was disallowed, but his names were kept.

Galileo's discovery was important for two reasons. First, it was a case of finding new members of the Solar system—members that

**And people ask me why I prefer writing non-fiction to fiction! I couldn't possibly get away with these ridiculous flights of fantasy in fiction.*

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were unknown to the ancients—and such a thing had never happened before. This alone shook the common notion among the intellectual establishment of the time to the effect that the Greek philosophers had brought all knowledge to its final pitch.

Then, too, in 1610 there were still some among the educated ignoramuses who refused to budge from the ancient position that all heavenly bodies, without exception, circled the Earth. Here at least were four bodies that clearly and visibly circled a body other than Earth. They circled Jupiter.

The only way to deny this was to refuse to look at them, and some great thinkers of the day actually did just that. They refused to look through the telescope, reasoning that since the satellites were not mentioned in Aristotle, they weren't there, and that to look at them would merely unsettle the mind.

In Galileo's time, there were no decent methods for measuring intervals of time accurately. It was not until 1656 that the Dutch scientist, Christian Huygens, had devised a method for having the hands of a clock driven by the even motion of a swinging pendulum.

(This was based on the discovery, over half a century before, that a pendulum swung with an even periodicity, independent, to a certain extent, of the size of the swing. This basic discovery was made by you-know-who.*)

The pendulum clock invented by Huygens was the first time-piece that could reasonably be expected to keep time to the nearest minute for days on end.

Or could it? Could one be sure?

Until quite recently, mankind had to depend for the ultimate determination of time on periodic motions in heaven. There was the rotation of the Earth relative to the Sun (the day), the revolution of the Moon about the Earth relative to the Sun (the month), and the revolution of the Earth about the Sun (the year).

The shortest of these usable periodicities was the day, and for anything less than the day, there was nothing in the sky that would serve as an ultimate check.

But what if some new and shorter heavenly period were found by means of the telescope? Surely the heavenly motions—not being man-made—would be completely accurate, and even the best man-made clocks, even Huygens' pendulum clock, could be profitably checked against them.

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*Galileo

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The four satellites of Jupiter seemed just the thing. Io, Europa, and Ganymede passed behind Jupiter every revolution, since the orbits were seen nearly edge-on. Callisto, the farthest of the four could sometimes be made out above or below the globe of Jupiter as it passed behind, but it was usually eclipsed, too.

In general, Io was eclipsed every 1 3/4 days; Europa, every 3 1/2 days; Ganymede every 7 1/7 days, and Callisto every 16 2/3 days. The moment of eclipse could be detected with considerable precision, and as the moments were separated by irregular intervals you could get measurements of all sorts of time-periods from 1 3/4 days on down to a few minutes.

Using the best time-pieces available, the intervals between successive eclipses of the different satellites were measured, and with that as a start, and taking all sorts of refinements into consideration, the times of future eclipses were calculated.

Once that was done, there was every reason to think that an accurate clock in the sky was available for short periods of time. Any clock being used could always be checked against the configuration of the satellites of Jupiter and be pushed a little ahead or a little behind in accord with what the four satellite-hands of the Jupiter-clock indicated.

Except that peculiar things began to happen. The observatory clock did gain, slightly but steadily, and then after some months of this it began to lose again. In fact, if it were watched long enough, it gained, then lost, then gained, then lost, in a slow, but very regular period. Nor did it matter how carefully the satellite observations were made and remade and how meticulously the calculations of future eclipse-moments were made. The clocks persisted in this slow regular swing of gaining and losing. What's more, if different clocks were involved, they all gained and lost simultaneously, even though by any other criteria they seemed to be neither gaining nor losing.

In 1675, by which time the Italian-French astronomer, Giovanni Domenico Cassini, had made observations of Jupiter's satellites with unprecedented accuracy, it could only be concluded that it was the clock in the sky that was unreliable. If you took averages of the intervals between eclipses and used that average as what "ought to be" it turned out that the eclipses were sometimes ahead of time by as much as eight minutes and sometimes behind time by as much as eight minutes. They switched from early to late to early to late in a gradual and periodic fashion, and no one knew why.

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And it was in 1675 that a Danish astronomer, Olaus Roemer, considered the problem.

In 1619, Kepler had worked out an accurate model of the Solar system, with all the planetary orbits in place. Astronomers had learned how to handle the model, and Roemer knew quite well the relative positions of Earth and Jupiter at any given time.

Roemer used Cassini's observations and calculations and decided to match particular eclipses with the planetary positions.

It turned out that the eclipses came earliest when Earth and Jupiter were on the same side of the Sun, and when, in fact, they were as close together as they could get.

Earth, being closer to the Sun than Jupiter is, moves considerably faster in its orbit than Jupiter does. Earth therefore races ahead of Jupiter, and, curving in its orbit, moves away from it. And, as the distance between Jupiter and Earth increases, the timing of the satellite-eclipses grew steadily later.

When Earth and Jupiter are on directly opposite sides of the Sun and are as far apart as possible, the eclipses come latest. (Of course, when Earth and Jupiter are on opposite sides of the Sun, Jupiter is too close to the Sun, in Earth's sky, to observe. The results of observations when Jupiter *can* be seen, however, made Roemer quite certain as to what was happening while Jupiter was skulking in the vicinity of the Solar blaze.)

Then, as Earth continues to race on and begins to approach Jupiter again, the timing of the eclipses begins to grow earlier.

What it amounts to is that the eclipse-time when Earth is at maximum distance from Jupiter is 16 minutes (the lapse from 8 minutes early to 8 minutes late) later than when Earth is at minimum distance from Jupiter.

To Roemer, there seemed a possible solution. Suppose light travelled at some very rapid but finite speed. When a satellite passed Jupiter its light was cut off, but an observer on Earth didn't see the cut-off instantly (as he would if the speed of light were infinite. Instead, the beam of light continues travelling toward Earth at its finite speed and it is only at some time after the actual moment of eclipse that the cut-off reaches the observer and the satellite's light actually winks out.

When Jupiter and Earth are closest together, light from Jupiter and its satellites travels to Earth at its orbital near-point to Jupiter. When Jupiter and Earth are farthest apart, on opposite sides of the Sun, light from Jupiter travels to the Earth's orbital near-point, and then must travel, *in addition*, the complete width of Earth's

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orbit to get to Earth's position at the far-point.

If it takes light about 16 minutes to cross the full width of Earth's orbit, then the behavior of the satellite-eclipses is explained. Allow for the finite speed of light, and everything falls into place; the eclipses come on the dot, never too early and never too late by an instant.

The question is, how fast must light travel to speed across the full width of Earth's orbit in 16 minutes?

When Kepler had devised his model of the Solar system, he didn't know its scale. He knew none of the interplanetary distances. If he had known one—only one—he could have calculated all the rest. But he didn't know that one.

In 1671, however, Cassini had managed to determine the parallax of Mars. From that he calculated the distance of Mars from Earth at that moment of time. From that and from the relative position of Earth and Mars in Kepler's model at that moment of time, which was also known, he could calculate all the other planetary distances.

Cassini's measurement of the parallax of Mars was just a little bit off (though it was an excellent piece of work for first-time-out), and his calculations showed the average distance of the Earth from the Sun to be 87,000,000 miles. The full width of Earth's orbit (from one spot on it, to the Sun, and then on to a spot at the opposite side) was twice that, or 174,000,000 miles.

If light managed to cross 174,000,000 miles in 16 minutes, then it must be travelling at a little over 180,000 miles per second.

And that was excellent, too, first time out. Since Cassini's time, we have refined the measurements of the scale of the Solar system. We know that the distance from the Earth to the Sun is just a hair under 93,000,000 miles, on the average, and we know that the speed of light is 186,282 miles per second; but considering the state of the art in Roemer's day, we can only accept his figure with complete satisfaction.

When we think of the speed of light, which is quite close to a million times the speed of sound, we need not wonder that Galileo's manful attempt failed. The time lapse involved in the passage of light over any Earthly distance is minute enough to ignore. It takes light (or anything else travelling at the speed of light; say, radio waves) less than 1/60 of a second to go from New York to Los Angeles.

For distances beyond Earth, however, the time-lapse becomes perceptible. It takes anywhere from 1.28 to 1.35 seconds for light

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to reach us from the Moon (depending on which part of its orbit the Moon is in and how far it is from us.) And, as indicated, it takes light an average of 8.3 minutes to reach Earth from the Sun and 16.6 minutes to cross the entire width of Earth's orbit.

The speed of light, though it seems incredibly fast by any ordinary standard, begins to wear an aura of finitude indeed when still longer distances are involved. It takes light over five hours to travel from the Sun to Pluto; over four years to travel from Alpha Centauri to ourselves; and over a billion years to travel from the nearest quasar to ourselves.

Considering that the speed of light is now known to be a fundamental constant of the Universe, it is distressing to have to report that its first announcement created no great stir and drew mixed reactions. Roemer announced his calculation of the speed of light at a meeting of the Academy of Sciences in Paris in 1676. Huygens was favorably impressed and so was Isaac Newton. The influential Cassini, however, was not. It was his observations and calculations that had been used, but that cut no ice with him. He was almost pathologically conservative, and Roemer's work was too far-out for him.

Under the weight of Cassini's displeasure, Roemer's determination of the speed of light was allowed to pass out of astronomical consciousness for half a century.

Then, in 1728, an English astronomer, James Bradley, determined the speed of light from another kind of astronomical observation altogether. Although the two methods were completely independent, Bradley's figure was very close to Roemer's figure, and after that, there was no forgetting.

Roemer took his proper niche in the history of science and has never been lost sight of again.

—But, now, before I leave, let me make two points.

1) Roemer's method of determining the speed of light was almost like a cosmic repetition of Galileo's experiment, and did what I had earlier suggested, in mockery, to be impossible. A star, or at least the star-like points of the satellites, were turned on and off; not by any man-made device to be sure, but by Jupiter and by the facts of celestial mechanics—and that did just as well. And the notion *was* moonshine, for it was moonshine (the light of the moons of Jupiter) that did the trick.

2) Although the speed of light is nearly a million times the speed of sound, it was light whose speed was accurately determined first—and by sixty years.

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We've been fortunate enough to publish some fine Keith Laumer stories (most recently, "Once There Was A Giant," November 1968), mostly serious or action-adventure pieces, which Laumer does very well. He is also very good with humorous sf, and his stories about the wacky adventures of Jame Retief of the Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne have gained a huge following. Humor, as always, being in short supply in sf, we're delighted to offer here a new Retief story.

The Garbage Invasion

by KEITH LAUMER

"I THINK IT'S AN OUTrage," said Anne Taylor, who was tall and beautiful and held the title: Field Curator of Flora and Fauna, assigned to the unpopulated world, Delicia; she stamped a riding-booted foot soundlessly on the carpet covering the floor of the office of Vice Consul Jame Retief of the *Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne*, on detached duty to the Galactic Regional Organization for the Protection of Environments, temporarily also assigned to Delicia as Acting Wildlife Officer.

"It's an outrage," Anne repeated, "that those sticky-fingered little Groaci should have the temerity to even make application to GROPE to have Delicia declared an authorized disposal area."

Retief and Miss Taylor were standing by the wide French doors, which were open to the spring breeze. Below them a sweep of tree-dotted emerald sward stretched away over low hills until it was lost in the deep-purple shadows of the forest clothing the slopes of the mountain range rising in the middle distance. Scattered herds of sleek, deer-like ruminants grazed peacefully across the plain; tall, rose-colored birds waded in the shallow lakes that mirrored the morning sun. Here and there, patches of vivid wild flowers added chromatic variety to the scene.

"GROPE hasn't yet okayed the Groaci request," Retief replied mildly, "so things could be worse."

"Why, when I was first

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assigned here," Anne Taylor said, "I didn't know a thing in the world about Delicia. But it's all so perfectly lovely and unspoiled, here, it's absolutely captivated my heart. I'd almost go so far as to say it's even prettier than back home on Plantation II. It would be perfectly horrid to spoil it all by turning it into a garbage dump. And you can never tell what those ninnies back at GROPE might do. There are two Groaci on the Interspecies Council, you know. They may get their way yet."

"Still, while the air remains unsullied, we may as well breathe a little of it," Retief said. He lead the way out onto the small railed balcony outside the third-floor office. They drew a deep breath of the untainted air, scented delicately of magnolia blossoms.

"Don't give up hope, Anne," Retief said. "The Terran proposal that Delicia be declared a galactic park is still pending. It may win through in spite of Groaci opposition. Mr. Magnan will no doubt bring news on that point when he arrives this afternoon."

"Now just why is this Mr. Magnan coming here?" Anne inquired. "I know he's another diplomat like you, only higher ranking, but why is he interested in an out-of-the-way place like Delicia? I thought I was doing a pretty good job here all by myself with just my half dozen rangers to do the heavy work. And now all of a sudden I've got CDT types dropping in to take over. Not that *you* aren't welcome, Jame. Of course, you're a perfectly charming gentleman. But I don't know about this Mr. Magnan. What kind of fellow is he?"

"Mr. Magnan is a seasoned diplomat," Retief said. "He tends to be a bit jumpy at times—but his instincts are basically sound."

"Why is he coming here?" Anne asked. "Nobody's visited me since that bunch of GROPE busybodies, last year."

"Just a routine observational visit, I suppose," Retief said. "I think you'll find that Mr. Magnan will be happy to just sight-see and leave the responsibility to you. As for myself, I have no intention of taking over."

"Well, that's a relief," Anne said. "After two years on Delicia, I've almost come to feel as though it's my private property, and I hate to think of anyone changing things." Miss Taylor extended her arms in a stretch. She was a slender girl, with a trim yet curvaceous figure, an aristocratically pretty face, and luxuriant auburn hair. She was dressed in gray whipcord jodhpurs, a starched

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white blouse, and a fringed suede vest of Lincoln green. Her hair was tied back with a red ribbon. The silence of the sunny morning was broken by a distant dull rumble.

"Oh, dear," Anne said, "I hope it isn't going to rain. I've been thinking we might take a stroll before lunch."

"That's not thunder," Retief said. "It sounds like a shuttle-craft cutting atmosphere. I suspect that it's Mr. Magnan arriving right on schedule."

"Well, I hope he has the good taste to land in the parking area and doesn't just drop in here on the grounds of Admin House and tear up the lawn and mash my flower beds," Anne said.

A moment later it was apparent that her wish was to be fulfilled, as a small, squat, bottle-shaped landing craft appeared over the foothills, descending slowly, supported by the glowing purple column of a gravitic drive. The grazing herds of wild animals scattered as the craft descended amid a muted rumbling and a shrill whine. It came to rest squarely in the center of the triangular landing pad, and the glare of its drive faded to a dull pink and winked out.

Retief and Anne left the office and rode the escalator down to the lobby, a spacious room bright with sunlight tinged green by the broad fronds of the potted plants arrayed before the wide windows. Outside, Retief pressed the button of his pocket signaler, which caused an automated two-man carrier to back from the garage behind the tall jade-green building, and scoot smoothly around the circular drive to brake to a halt beside them, open its hatch, and wait, balanced on its two soft-tired wheels, its turbine-driven gyros humming softly.

Retief assisted the girl into the forward of the two contoured seats, and climbed in after her. The interior of the vehicle smelled faintly of new paint and tump leather. He turned the knurled knob which reduced the scale of the map displayed on the location screen, so that it showed in detail an area of roughly one square mile, centered on the admin complex. The newly arrived vessel was indicated by a point of green light approximately a quarter mile distant. Retief noted the coordinates and punched them into the guidance console, then pressed the ACTIVATE button. The hatch closed silently; the air blowers started up with a rhythmic *whirr*. The vehicle rolled forward a few feet on the paved drive, then executed a neat turn to the left, hopped a foot into the air, and scooted

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smoothly forward on a direct course for the gray vessel squatting incongruously beyond the row of heo trees that lined the landing pad. Anne activated the car's tape system and a Puccini aria emanated from the stereo speakers. The car shot through an opening between two trees, circled the base of the newly arrived shuttlecraft, came to a halt, and sank down onto its wheels with a soft *whoosh!* of released air cushion. Retief poked a button and the transparent clamshell hatch opened. A moment later a ladder deployed from the side of the spacecraft looming above. A rectangular port opened at its upper end, and a thin, narrow-shouldered man in an impeccably cut gray executive coverall with a CDT pocket patch appeared. He waved jauntily, turned and started down the ladder.

"Gracious, Retief," he called over his shoulder, "I do hope my visit hasn't interrupted any important undertaking here on the local scene."

"I'm afraid not," Retief said. "Miss Taylor and I are still at the formal stage." He smiled at the girl. She grinned cheerfully at him in return.

Retief climbed down out of the car.

"Miss Taylor," he said formally, "may I present Career Minister Magnan of the CDT. Mr. Magnan," he addressed the senior diplomat, "you'll see many beautiful sights here on Delicia, none more delightful than the person of Miss Anne Taylor, who is Field Curator of Flora and Fauna, the sole and highest ranking official on the entire planet, a position, I'm sure you realize, of considerable responsibility and one which Miss Taylor has fulfilled with commendable efficiency for the past year."

"I'm enchanted to make your acquaintance, Miss Taylor," Magnan said, bowing from the waist as elegantly as could be managed while clinging to a ladder. "Goodness me, haven't you found it desperately lonely being the only rational creature on an entire world?"

"I have half a dozen rangers," Anne said, "several of whom are quite rational when they haven't had too much Alpha Pale Ale."

"Of course," Magnan said, and managed a faint blush. "I meant to cast no aspersions on your colleagues, no matter how humble their station. I merely had reference to the curious fact that Delicia, while ideally suited for organic life as we know it, supports no indigenous form more highly evolved than a grazing ruminant."

"Don't worry, Mr. Magnan," Retief said, "the combined heights of those six rangers is

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thirty-nine feet, but I won't tell them what you said."

"Retief, I'm here with news of some importance and quite frankly, I wish your advice. I trust you're not going to be difficult," Magnan said with some asperity.

"That depends on what you want me to do," Retief said. "If you'd like me to stay here for another six months on full per diem allowance, I'll go along with the idea with no complaints." He turned to the girl. "Why don't you take the car back, Anne? I'll escort Mr. Magnan over, and we'll meet you at the office. It will give you time to mix us a couple of tall cool ones and to punch in a nice dinner to celebrate Mr. Magnan's visit."

"How does *fried chicken Sanders* sound?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing overly exotic, please," Magnan protested. "Simple hearty fare suits me very well. In fact I've been known to spend an entire afternoon munching contentedly on a Hebrew National Salami-on-rye, while a state banquet proceeded in an adjoining room."

"Sorry, my culinator's not programmed for any of those un-Christian victuals," Anne demurred. "I had a team of inspectors in here from someplace called Pakistan a few months back. Up till then I always thought curry was something you did to horses."

"Please, no apologies, my dear," Magnan said, and almost slipped off his rung, attempting a curtsy. "Come, Retief," he said, casting a regretful glance after the girl as the car moved off. "It's a perfect morning for a stroll. Quite an attractive though undeveloped world," he said, looking around at the park-like lawn scattered with wild flowers. "Rather a pity, actually, that it will not long remain so."

"You mentioned some important news, Mr. Magnan," Retief said.

"Ah, of course. You'll recall that I have for some months been acting as CDT liaison officer to GROPE. We're faced with a deeply perplexing problem at the moment. It's necessary that I find a solution to the Basuran question at once or forever disappoint mother's hopes for a great career for me."

"Is that the news that you hurried out to Delicia to pass along to me?"

"Don't make light of the problem, Retief. We're discussing the imminent prospect of the utter extinction of an entire intelligent species, due to the fact that they've overfed their range to such an extreme degree that, although their metabolisms are such that they can

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sustain themselves on a diet of raw metals and silicon if necessary—there remains not an assimilable molecule on their entire planet, which, as you know, lies only a parsec distant from Delicia."

"And you still consider them an intelligent species?" Retief commented.

"Such situations are not uncommon," Magnan reminded Retief. "Think for a moment of the fate of the mainland Chinese, back on Terra, six centuries ago. By the way, I've often wondered why they were called mainland Chinese—also Red Chinese? The few persons of Chinese ancestry I've met have had rather sallow, yellowish complexions, not red at all."

"Surely there's more news to come," Retief said.

"By all means," Magnan replied. "Unhappily, at the time of my departure, the GROPE docket was crammed with over one hundred urgent appeals from member worlds facing ecological breakdown due to the accretion of waste products, both biological and industrial. For some curious reason Chief Ecological Coordinator Crodfeller allocated seventy-nine of these applications to me for solution, a task approximately equivalent in complexity to rescoring an equal number of Groaci nose-flute cadenzas for a steel band, jew's-harp and comb. When I sought counsel of Director of Ecological Affairs Straphanger, far from interceding to effect a more equitable distribution of work load, or even commiserating, he assigned me additional duty as project officer for facilitation of the Terran resolution anent designation of Delicia as a galactic park."

"What are the prospects for GROPE adoption of the resolution?" Retief asked.

"Dim, I should say," Magnan replied. "Shortly before my departure, I conferred with Ambassador Fiss, head of the Groaci delegation to GROPE, and he was quite adamant. He insisted it was his government's unalterable position that the provision of suitable off-world dumping grounds was a matter of far greater import than the perpetuation of primitive natural conditions on Delicia as a recreational habitat pleasing to the unformed esthetic instincts of lesser species. Alas," Magnan sighed, eyeing the unspoiled landscape, "I fear that unless Fiss can be placated, all this is doomed. Fiss, as you know, is a formidable negotiator, and I fear that he has secured the support of a number of the other worlds faced with similar disposal problems. But let us not dwell on such depressing prospects. I intend to carry on with my planning on the off

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chance that the park scheme should win through. Gracious, I'm all a-bubble with plans," he went on, rubbing his hands together. "Two hundred million square miles of unsullied meadows, uplands, hills, valleys, lakes, seas, islands—all waiting the creative hand of the landscape architects."

"What's wrong with leaving it as it is?" Retief suggested.

"Mmm. It has a certain bucolic charm, of course," Magnan conceded. "But I can hardly accrue mana ER-wise by resting on my oars. No, I picture a planet-wide complex of miniature golf courses, roadside zoos, artificial rock gardens, and chlorinated swimming pools, all linked by a network of ten-lane superhighways, with adequate paved parking, of course; plus the necessary motels, service stations, beauty emporia, and souvenir shops to convert the wilderness into a true, unspoiled garden spot. Why, the concessions alone will net enough income to finance a planet-wide system of forty-foot billboards advertising the beauty of the place!"

"A prospect to set the heart of any conservationist to beating, if not into fibrillation," Retief commented.

"Here, what's *that?*" Magnan pointed a well-manicured finger at a scrap of paper blowing across the lawn on the spring breeze.

"Litterbugs?" he exclaimed in an anguished tone.

"Maybe one of the rangers tossed it down, doubtless in defiance of Miss Taylor's instructions," Retief suggested.

"If so, I'll have him transferred to the Icebox System and assigned to snow-worm tally!" Magnan retorted. "Come along, Retief!" Magnan pounced, came up with the offending object, a plastine bag lettered KRISPY KRUNCHY KORN-KURLS.

Retief stooped, caught up a second paper as it tumbled past. "Sulf-R Smoked Gribble Grubs," he read.

"Gribble Grubs?" Magnan queried. "That's a Groaci export item, hardly palatable even to a ranger."

More papers came sailing across the grass: candy wrappers, dope-stick sleeves, a large pink newspaper printed in unfamiliar characters. Magnan darted after them, uttering sharp cries of indignation as more and more waxed sandwich bags and crumpled paper napkins whirled toward them from upwind, driven by the rising breeze.

"Let us investigate the source," Magnan suggested, planting a foot on a gallon-sized potato-chip bag. "They're gaining on us."

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"It's coming from over that line of hills," Retief said.

"Let's hurry; I want to catch the vandals in the act!" Magnan said.

"I suggest we check with Miss Taylor first," Retief demurred. "She may know what's going on."

Retief and Magnan entered the admin building, rode the escalator to the third floor, and went along the corridor to Retief's office. Anne Taylor stood by the window staring out in the direction of the landing pad. A flurry of white paper scraps came drifting across the grass, accompanied by a straggle of small objects which rolled, wind-driven, scattering out to mar the smooth-mowed turf.

"What in the world is that?" she cried, and whirled to face the two diplomats. "Did y'all see that bunch of garbage blowing around the lawn?"

"We saw it," Retief said, "and thought perhaps it was something you had authorized."

"Never! I don't allow my rangers to so much as spit on the grass, if y'all will pardon the expression."

At that moment, the large Navy-issue communicator panel set amid the book shelves on the right wall of the office crackled and lit up, displaying a round Terran face of a mottled mauve hue, bearing an expression suggesting an acute dispeptic attack.

"Why, it's Director Straphanger," Magnan cried, in a tone of patently artificial delight. "Why, hi, there! Mr. Director. I'm here on Delicia, as you see, and I have matters well under control."

"Have you indeed?" Straphanger inquired in a voice suggesting the premonitory rumblings of a volcano on the brink of eruption. "That's gratifying news, I'm sure, inasmuch as everything here at Sector has been deteriorating toward full disaster status with a speed which would be incredible to one unfamiliar with bureaucratic life."

Magnan cleared his throat delicately. "If you'll recall, Mr. Director," he said, "I predicted that my departure at this time would have unfortunate repercussions efficiency-wise in the progress of our programs."

"No man is indispensable, Magnan, least of all you," Straphanger bellowed. "The dire straits in which I find myself are, luckily for your future, only peripherally related to your singular lack of effectiveness in developing a solution to the disposal problem. The immediate cause for my call is an untoward development *in re* the Basuran

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question. As you know, an emergency program was initiated by GROPE last year, and large shipments of foodstuffs were transported to Basur. But even with this dietary supplement, they continued heedlessly with the destruction of their habitat, and since they find both igneous and sedimentary rocks quite palatable, they have now consumed the northern half of their main continent, including a number of their largest cities, thus compounding their problem. Driven to desperation, and energized perhaps, by this remarkable piece of gluttony, they have now burst forth from their system with a gigantic fleet of surplus war vessels which were donated by Boge as emergency rations, and have unabashedly announced their intention to invade whatever hapless worlds lie in their path, in quest of food. It appears that unless firm steps are taken at once, they will come sweeping up through the Eastern Arm, like a horde of all-devouring locusts, stripping every world in their path bare to the magma. Even now these voracious gluttons are approaching Delicia."

"In spite of the heavy pressure of my duties," Straphanger pointed out, "I have taken time to notify you of their impending arrival, although making this call has cut seriously into my lunch hour, thus affording you an opportunity to make good your escape."

Magnan bobbed his head at the fading image on the screen. "Most thoughtful of you, Mr. Director," he said fervently. "There, Retief," he continued, turning to the younger man, "you've just overheard a most heartwarming example of the *esprit* which informs the *Corps* from the highest echelons to the lowest."

"The man's all heart," Retief agreed. "But there's still garbage blowing across the garden."

"Quite," Magnan said briskly. "You may as well step along now and put an end to the nuisance."

"You don't have a gun, do you, Anne?" Retief inquired of the girl.

"I surely do," she replied. "No real lady would allow herself to be found alone on a planet with six big old rangers with no means of defending her honor." With a deft motion, she extracted a slim-barreled 2mm needler from her *decolletage* and handed it over.

"Amazing," Retief said. "I wouldn't have thought there was room in there for anything else." He tucked the gun into his belt.

"Retief! Whatever are you

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thinking of?" Magnan squeaked.

"I'm thinking of how surprised those picnickers or whatever will be when I don't simply appeal to their better natures."

"Heavens, Retief, every situation can be dealt with by use of appropriate words," Magnan reproved. "That's the basic tenet of diplomacy as we know it."

"Maybe that's what's wrong with diplomacy as we know it," Retief said.

Outside, Retief noted that the quantity of scrap paper and plastic blowing over the grass had, if anything, increased in the last five minutes. He stooped to pick up one of the solid objects included in the drift of rubbish invading the lawn. There were hundreds of identical six-inch cylinders, of a porous texture, a dull gray-and-tan color. They rolled easily, pushed by the breeze. The object in Retief's hand was feather-light, with the feel of foam plastic. On close scrutiny he recognized it as a compacted cylinder of shredded gribble-grub husk, a by-product of the Groaci snack industry. More and more of the cylinders rolled down the slope, spreading out across the close-cropped verdant sward. Retief walked toward the point of origin, a saddle-shaped notch in the grassy ridge a few hundred yards west of Admin House. More and more debris came swirling downwind. Retief reached the crest of the rise, looked down at the long narrow valley which extended southward, rimmed on both sides by wooded slopes. The floor of the valley was a level grassland dotted with crimson-foliaged trees. A sparkling stream wound along the center of the valley, fed by a picturesque waterfall tumbling down over the rocks at Retief's right and feeding into a lake at the far end of the valley, which reflected the blue sky and bits of whipped-cream cloud. Halfway down the length of the valley, a mile and a half from Retief's vantage point, a space-scarred space-yacht of unmistakable Groaci design rested on its side beside the stream. Around it, half a dozen Groaci stood, apparently admiring the view. Immediately beyond the spacecraft, lay the first of a string of a dozen immense gray sausage-like barges, each with the identical symbol blazoned on its prow: a group of alien characters which appeared to spell out *eggnog*. Each of the big gray cylinders had opened a set of doors which ran nearly the length of its hull and was busily discharging raw garbage in giant windrows, from which the breeze was snatching away

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papers and bits of other light debris, sending them rolling up the slope, through the notch, and down across the Admin House grounds.

As Retief started down the slope, he heard a sharp cry from behind him and turned to see Magnan struggling over the hilltop clutching his beret against the wind's efforts to send it skittering after the waste paper.

"Here," Magnan shouted, the word almost inaudible over the fluting of the wind and the splashing of the waterfall. "Never mind bothering about these bits of paper and waste. A crisis of far greater magnitude is at hand." He half slid down the steep slope and clutched at Retief's arm just in time to retain his balance.

"They're here," he yelped. "Just as Director Straphanger said! The Basuran fleet has taken up orbit a few thousand miles out, and their leader, a ferocious fellow named All Conqueror of Foes Cheese, threatens drastic action if we don't surrender our fleet on the instant."

"What drastic action?" Retief asked.

"A. C. of F. Cheese didn't specify," Magnan said in a choked tone. "But judging from the bellicosity of his attitude, he's ready to stop at nothing."

"Good," Retief said. "That's about all we've got to stop him with."

"Retief, if we hurry along briskly, we can reach my shuttlecraft before Cheese has landed," Magnan blurted.

"And then what?" Retief inquired.

"Why then we can whisk ourselves off under his very nose and leave him none the wiser."

"What about Miss Taylor?" Retief asked.

"I'm afraid she's in no position to help us, having no transportation at her disposal."

"So you intend to desert her and leave her to her fate?"

"I suppose it does sound just the teensiest bit unchivalrous when you put it that way," Magnan conceded. "However Miss Taylor seems a resourceful young person. I'm sure she'll understand. Besides, no one will know."

"*She* will," Retief said. "And what about those thirty-nine feet of ranger?"

"Unfortunate, but there's no help for it. They'll simply have to hope for an attitude of clemency on the part of Cheese."

"And just what does this Cheese expect from us?" Retief asked.

"He demands the immediate surrender of our fleet. I told him quite candidly that we had no fleet here, but he openly

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accused me of perjury, and insisted that he had seen the fleet maneuvering off-world a few hours ago. It was that which attracted his attention. He demands its immediate surrender on pain of drastic reprisals. Goodness me, Retief, whatever shall we do?"

"We'd better surrender the fleet," Retief said.

"Either you haven't been paying attention or that remark is intended as another of your ill-timed japes," Magnan snapped. "I'm going to return to the office and brew a nice pot of sassafras tea. You may join me if you wish."

"Thank you," Retief said. "First I'd like to speak to the gribble-grub lovers."

Magnan glanced past Retief, saw the grounded garbage scows. "Oh, I see. It's a party of picnickers camped by the stream. I authorize you to speak sharply to them, Retief. It's atrocious the way they're littering their waste about."

"Armed with such instructions, how can I fail?" Retief inquired rhetorically and turned to continue his descent, as Magnan scrambled back up the path.

"On second thought," Retief called after Magnan, "I haven't had a cup of sassafras tea since the Fustian Ambassador's reception for the Admirable F'Kau-Kau-Kau of Yill, and on that occasion Colonel Underknuckle spiked it with half a gill of Bacchus Black."

"I recall the incident," Magnan said sharply. "Disgraceful: Ambassador Longspoon, suspecting nothing, downed three cups while having a cozy chat with the Groaci military attache. Alas, far from pumping General Shish of the details of the Groaci maneuvers in the Goober Cluster, the colonel divulged the details of all Terrestrial peace operations in the Arm for a five year period, resulting not only in a number of embarrassments for Secretary Barnshingle, when Nosy Parkers poking about in our good-will convoys uncovered what they claimed to be offensive weapons, but also in Secretary Barnshingle's relegation to the Jaq desk in the department over which he had once towered as chief. Not only that, Retief, but you'll recall I was assigned as catering officer for the affair, and during Colonel Underknuckel's, or should I say Corporal Underknuckle's court-martial, certain small-minded individuals went so far as to suggest that a share of the blame should be laid at my door. Thus, sassafras tea, while a warmly sustaining beverage, far more suited to the dignity and responsibility of one's role as an officer of the CDT than harsh spiritous

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distillates of the kind favored by certain rowdies, is not without its melancholy associations."

"I don't want to precipitate a traumatic emotional experience for you, Mr. Magnan," Retief said, "so perhaps we'd better just crack a magnum of Lovenbroy autumn wine."

"As it happens," Magnan called over his shoulder, "I have a dozen of Lovenbroy aboard the lighter, a gift to you from a Mr. Arapoulous, who visited my office at Sector yesterday with an outrageous proposal for CDT sponsorship of some barbaric festival at which he specifically requested your attendance in the capacity of Inspector of Prizes."

"You accepted on my behalf, I hope," Retief said.

"By no means," Magnan said in a tone of sharp rebuke. "I have reason to believe that the prizes to which he alluded are nubile young women selected for pulchritude and but scantily attired. Imagine! Handing out girls to champion grape pickers as if they were hand-knitted tea cosies."

"It's fantastic, isn't it?" Retief said. "With that going on only a few light-years away, we're sitting out here planning a sassafras tea party."

"Never mind, Retief. Such depravity does prey on one's mind, but there are reasons to hope that in time these excesses will be halted."

"Let's hope so," Retief said. "In the meantime we can make a start by pouring the sassafras tea into Miss Taylor's potted froom-froom plants."

Back in Retief's office as the two diplomats entered, the communicator screen set in the ornamental bookcase crackled softly: "Ah, there you are, Magnan," a metallic voice said.

Only one familiar with the Basuran physiognomy would have recognized the composition displayed on the picture tube as the face of a living creature. It resembled a geometric approximation of a giant clamshell executed in flat planes of bluish metal.

"Oh, sorry to have kept you waiting, All Conqueror Cheese," Magnan called. "I've just been discussing your proposal with my colleague."

"Perhaps," the Basuran said in a voice like an eight-pound hammer hitting an anvil, "you misunderstood me, Terran. The terms I outlined do not constitute a proposal, but an ultimatum."

"Goodness me, I understand perfectly," Magnan reassured the alien. "Your insistence on my surrender of the Delician war fleet is quite understandable, and I'm doing my best to make the arrangements; so I

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trust you'll withhold the saturation bombing for a little while."

"I'll give you a few moments longer," Cheese said graciously. "I don't wish it to be said that I was overly harsh in my dealings even with mere Terrans."

"What's that about the Delician war fleet?" Retief asked.

"We have to surrender it at once," Magnan said, "or Cheese will bomb the planet to a cinder."

"That being the case," Retief said, "we'd better get busy."

"I couldn't agree more heartily," Magnan sighed, "but just how does one go about surrendering one's fleet when one doesn't have a fleet?"

"One does the best one can with what one has," Retief said.

Magnan deftly scaled his beret across the room, scoring a bull's-eye on a plaster bust of the long-defunct first Terrestrial Ambassador to an alien species: Fenwick T. Overdog, who, according to a brass plate on his chest, was sent out from Terra as Ambassador Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to the then newly discovered world Yalc in the year 450 A.E. (AD 2899), the bright-colored headgear lent an unaccustomed air of jauntiness to the old diplomat's grim visage. Moments later a bland odor of licorice filled the air. Magnan fussed busily over the dainty cups and saucers he had unpacked from his CDT field kit and soon poured out the steaming pink fluid.

"Oh, I almost forgot," he said. "Your present from that bucolic person I told you of." From his briefcase he extracted a foot-long, tapered bundle of dusty tissue paper and handed it over. Retief stripped away the wrappings to expose an age-blackened hand-blown bottle of deep-green glass through which the sunlight glowed, eliciting glints of ruby-red from the wine the flask contained.

"You said something about a dozen," Retief said. "You haven't got eleven more bottles in that briefcase, have you?"

"Never mind," Magnan said, "I won't trouble you with the rest. You may leave them aboard the lighter. I'll dispose of them somehow. They're all dusty and dirty anyway, as though they'd been cleaned out of some old cellar somewhere. Hardly a tasteful offering even to a mere Third Secretary."

"I'll make room for them somehow," Retief said. He stripped the wire from the bottle, eased the cork out with his thumbs. It popped up with a sharp report and a rich and fruity aroma at once permeated the room.

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"Well, I'll declare!" a feminine voice said from the door. Anne Taylor stood there looking fresh and charming in buckskin skirt and beaded blouse. She sniffed the air.

"What a perfectly heavenly smell," she exclaimed. "It reminds me of the time Uncle Harry, the senator, christened our yacht. Funny thing," she went on, "a minute ago, I thought I smelled paregoric or some nasty old medicine."

"Tea, Miss Taylor?" Magnan said, proffering a cup.

Retief picked up a Yalcan wine goblet of violet glass from the table at the side of the office, poured it half full of the deep-red wine, and offered it to the girl. "Will you join me?" he said, and filled a second goblet, this one of paper-thin crystal-clear glass.

"No, thank you, Mr. Magnan," she said with a smile, refusing his cup, and took the purple glass from Retief.

Her eyes strayed across the room to the communicator screen on which A. C. of F. Cheese was still gnashing his mandibular plates with a sound like a dishwasher demolishing a plate.

"Well, what in the world is *that?*" she cried.

"That, my dear," Magnan replied cooly, "is the commanding admiral of a vast fleet of hostile warships which are even now orbiting the planet with the intention of demolishing it utterly unless I perform an act of incredible cleverness at once."

"It looks more like the front end of my li'l ol' turbocad—the one with the bad brakes. But you talk as if it was a somebody instead of a something."

"A. C. of F. Cheese is, I fear, legally classified as a somebody—quite an important somebody—and quite capable of carrying out his threat."

"What is this simply incredibly clever thing you're supposed to do, Mr. Magnan? Anything special, or will just any old incredibly clever thing do? I'm dying to hear about it."

"All Conqueror Cheese insists that I surrender the Delician war fleet at once."

"How can you do that?" Anne demanded. "There's no such thing."

"That's what requires the cleverness," Magnan replied tartly.

"So what are you going to *do?* You've just got to save this sweet li'l ol' planet!"

"I intend," Magnan said grandly, "to deal with the matter in my usual decisive fashion."

"But *how?*" Anne wailed.

"Retief, kindly advise All Conqueror Cheese of our intentions."

Retief turned to the screen.

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"Where would you like the fleet delivered?" he asked.

"Oh, never mind about that," Cheese said in a tone as genial as the crunch of a fender. "I'll just swoop down and gather it in where it lies at its cleverly camouflaged base."

"If it's so cleverly camouflaged, how come you know it's there?" Magnan cried.

"My chief intelligence officer, Intimidator of Mobs Blunge, shrewdly ferreted out its location from a study of various documents of a highly cryptic nature which fell into his hands. For a time, I confess, it appeared we'd be unable to crack your code. Symbol groups such as Sulf-R Smoked Gribble Grubs were rejected by our computers as utterly devoid of intelligence. Then it occurred to me that it was not necessary to decode the documents; the mere presence of encrypted material was sufficient evidence of military activity. I merely traced them to their source. But enough of these civilities: I must personally inspect my warheads now. Infinite attention to detail is the secret of success in great enterprise."

"But gribble grubs are a Groaci delicacy," Magnan protested to Retief. "They're not bad actually; a bit like Quoppina sourballs. But why would the Groaci be carrying our military maneuvers *here?*"

"Y'all gentlemen better get busy being incredibly clever," Miss Taylor pointed out. "Time's a-wasting."

"Before we break the news to All Conqueror Cheese that there's no fleet here to conquer," Magnan said, "why don't you just nip over and say a word to those picnickers, Retief? I'd like to turn over the planet in tidy condition."

"An excellent notion, Mr. Magnan," Retief said. He left the office and took the path across the lawn to the vantage point from which he had studied the Groaci garbage barges discharging cargo. The process had proceeded apace during his half hour's absence. A great dike of refuse now ran the length of the valley, paralleling the now empty scows. As Retief descended the hill, a spindle-legged Groaci in a magenta hipcloak of extreme cut emerged from the yacht and came bustling up to meet him, trailed by a pair of Peace Keepers with slung crater guns.

"To recognize one unhappily familiar to me from past encounters," the leading Groaci cried in his breathy voice. "None other than the notorious Retief, I'll hazard, or I am the littermate of nest-fouling drones!"

"To feel like going for a little ride, Shluh?" Retief inquired genially in Groaci.

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"To have completed my task here in exemplary fashion, and to be about to enjoy a well-earned siesta," Shluh replied with a contemptuous clack of his nether mandibles. With a wave he dismissed his escort, who hurried back to the nearest scow.

"To request a look at your authorizing order from GROPE permitting you to dump your gribble-grub skins here," Retief said.

"To point out reluctantly that your jokes are as atrocious as your accent, Soft One," Shluh hissed. He turned away.

"To wonder how long it will take you and your boys to load that stuff back aboard the barges," Retief remarked, eyeing the quarter-mile-long, twenty-foot-high heap of refuse now fouling the stream.

"To point out that the tub of hot sand readied for my slumbers is cooling rapidly whilst we natter of these trivia," Shluh whispered. "To hurry away now and leave you to ponder your own inscrutable riddle."

"To suggest a method of discovering the answer empirially," Retief said. "To distribute shovels and tell them to start in."

"Not to be so easily duped, Retief. To realize that so soon as my lads batten down the last hatch, your interest in research would stand revealed as ephemeral—a mere ploy to accomplish your true aim of negating my achievement. To insure that by your Terran glibness you do not hoax some unfortunate underling of mine into falling in with your scheme, I am lifting my command off at once, to return for a second load."

"To offer a suggestion," Retief said gently. "If GROPE hasn't authorized this visit, to consider the possibility that a flock of Peace Enforcers might be here any minute to interfere with your siesta."

"An unlikely eventuality," Shluh breathed airily. "To be as aware as yourself of the fecklessness of that irresolute body known as GROPE, the very name of which is an acronym in the Groaci tongue equivalent in blandness to an unsulfurated gribble grub."

"To burrow into your hot sand and heap it up over your auditory membranes, while events proceed without you," Retief urged.

"To have no fear, Retief; the nubile Groacian lady who awaits me will doubtless have hollowed out a burrow capacious enough to accommodate us both in cosy juxtaposition. To anticipate no event more exciting than the discovery of an overlooked gribble grub in a castoff package whilst I take my well-earned ease."

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Retief and the Groaci looked up as a shrill sound like a distant siren echoed across the hills, followed by a deep rumble.

"Retief," Shluh said, "a less sophisticated person than myself might take alarm at that sound, imagining hordes of vengeful Terry Peace Enforcers to be swooping down, bent on interfering with my peaceful and legitimate errand. But seasoned veteran of the interplanetary conference table that I am, I'm fully aware that GROPE's function is a purely conversational one, for all their brave talk of attacking the time-honored institution of environmental pollution and of unnatural interference with inscrutable nature's weeding out of the unfit via ecological pressure; the history of galactic diplomacy assures us that no act so direct and effective as the use of force would be contemplated for a moment by that huddle of ageing bureaucrats. Accordingly, I remain my usual suave and poised self. To pay no attention to the petite tremor of my lower throat sac which you may observe; it's but symptomatic of a touch of *Vrug*, which is no worse than a bad cold and will clear up spontaneously in a few days. Nonetheless, to be best if my personnel not wander too far afield." Shluh took a small brass whistle from a loop in his belt and blew a piercing blast. A moment later Groaci navvies in baggy ocher coveralls, spotted and stained by their labors in unloading their unsavory cargo, began emerging singly and in twos and threes from shady spots beneath the trees near the river, and hurrying toward their assigned vessels.

Shluh gave a violent start, dislodging two of his plain silver eye shields, as a sonic boom rolled across the valley, followed by a diminishing roar. A scarred and space-burned ship appeared above the hills, rushing straight toward the spot where Retief and Shluh stood. Its lumpy and asymmetrical hull, tumorous with gun emplacements, was obviously that of an elderly Bogan-designed warship, Retief saw at once. Half a dozen others followed in line astern. Their trajectory brought them in a low pass over the grounded garbage fleet. The air blast of their passage sent a shower of papers and plastic and light metal containers tumbling from the crest of the gigantic garbage heap, to be caught by the wind and swept up over the hilltop and out of sight.

"Mere sightseers, joy-riding, doubtless in defiance of regulations," Shluh commented. "But youth must have its fling. These are perhaps a group of cadets

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from the Groaci Space Institute trying their figurative wings. Mere high spirits; there's no harm in them." As the Groaci bent over to recover his fallen eye shields from the grass, there was a sharp report, and a gout of yellow fire erupted from the stern emplacement of the last vessel in line. Shluh straightened and whirled in time to see a twenty-foot crater appear adjacent to the prow of the converted yacht which served as his flagship, attended by a geyser of mud and garbage which clattered down, with a long, drawn-out drumming sound, along the dorsal keel of the ornately decorated vessel. Rich purple-black mud, not unmixed with fruit rinds, glimp egg shells and chicory grounds flowed down over the highly polished bright-plating and colored porcelain inlay work.

"Poor, dear, fragile Lady Tish!" Shluh groaned. "To have been terrified by the blast, poor innocent, having no way of recognizing it as a boyish prank."

"To better duck before this next prank takes your head off," Retief said. He threw himself flat, pulling the Groaci down with him. Accompanied by a long drawn-out screeching sound, an arrow of fire was arcing toward them from the direction in which the six warships had disappeared.

"A toy rocket!" Shluh cried, springing up. "No doubt an R C scale model of a *Dumbo* class luxury liner of early Concordiat times. To capture it in midflight before it sustains damage on striking the ground! My nephew, young Pilf, will be delighted with the trophy! Zounds!" he continued, grabbing at his remaining eye shields as a violent involuntary twitch of his eyestalks dislodged them, "there's another." He pointed. "And another!"

"And four more," Retief pointed out. "Are you sure they're just scale models of antique ships? If they were late model Bogan warheads, they'd have us nicely bracketed."

"To be beyond a doubt," Shluh said. "Drat! To have tarried too long. The *Dumbo* model is about to strike!"

The slim, yard-long missile slammed into the turf and detonated with a deafening report, sending clayey soil fountaining to patter down around Retief and the Groaci official. In swift succession six more explosions racketed across the valley. Retief got to his feet to see seven fresh craters neatly ringing his position.

"To look into this matter," Shluh shrilled, and dashed away downslope toward his mud-splattered yacht.

"I have a sudden craving for sassafras tea," Retief comment-

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ed aloud. "The party's getting rough."

"Alas!" Shluh keened, slowing to a mock-casual saunter. "To sense, somehow, that all is not as it should be. Doubtless a mere touch of nervousness on my part, arising from the well-known Groacian sensitivity to subtleties of mood."

"To not ignore your hunch," Retief advised. "That stick of bombs was enough to make a Fustian elder start tearing a hanky to shreds."

"To ignore the sly imtimation implicit in your choice of terms, Retief," Shluh whispered. "To have safely brought my command through parsecs of hostile space, safe to the designated destination, and to have discharged my cargo with exemplary promptitude, not intimidated by your hints of impending bureaucratic vengeance. Not to panic now."

"To admire your *savoir-faire*," Retief called after the Groaci. "Most people would think seven near-misses to be a sufficient hint that the hinting was over."

"At what do you hint now, unspeakable Soft One?" Shluh paused to hiss.

"To look for yourself," Retief said and pointed. Shluh hesitated, then whirled so quickly that all his eye shields once more fell to the grass. The blunt prow of one of the black-hulled warships was just nosing back into view over the rim of the hills, supported silently on beams of mauve light. It advanced, flattening the tall grass in a wide swath as it glided downslope toward the river, followed by its six sister ships. The guns bristling from the vessels' turrets traversed restlessly, but did not open fire.

"To not believe a word of it," Shluh whispered a bit hoarsely over his shoulder. "GROPE wouldn't dare!"

"To point out that you're up against hardware, not conversation," Retief said. "A battle cruiser speaks for itself."

With a sudden growl of atmospheric engines, the menacing ships deployed to ring in the grounded Groaci barges and came gently to rest.

"You there!" a harsh PA-amplified voice boomed from the lead ship and echoed across the valley. "There—there! Stand fast—ast! One move and I clear the dust out of every gun in my fleet!"

"To protest!" Shluh wailed in a half-hearted tone. "To consider this an outright act of war!"

"By your own Cadet Corps?" Retief asked.

"To possibly have mistaken the identity of the culprits," Shluh said faintly.

"Then whom are we going to blame?" Retief inquired.

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"Who else but the perfidious warmongers and provocateurs of GROPE?" Shluh wailed.

"To have agreed GROPE is all talk and no action," Retief reminded the Groaci.

"To now reconsider my earlier position," Shluh groaned. "In light of late developments."

"To mean you agree to load up now and haul your garbage elsewhere?" Retief persisted.

"To see no other choice in the face of such brutality," Shluh whispered. "And now to hurry back to Lady Tish and my waiting bath." He scuttled off toward the yacht.

Retief retrieved the Groaci's forgotten eye shields from the grass. As he dropped them in his pocket, a single sharp report rang out and a gout of turf exploded from the hillside a few yards behind Shluh, who accelerated his pace to a knock-kneed sprint. A second shot scored the ground directly in his path. He nimbly leapt the furrow thus created, and dashed madly for the shelter of the yacht.

The shots had come from the leading ship. It did not fire again, but ascended abruptly to tree-top level and cruised slowly along the length of the garbage heap, turned, and came back. A hundred yards from Retief it settled to the ground.

"Make no further move to escape!" the metallic voice boomed out from the ship. "You and all your minions are my prisoners! I observed your crews hurrying to man their guns, and but now observed your second-in-command rushing for his post, doubtless to convey your 'open fire' order. I suggest you repair at once to your flagship and countermand any such rash instructions. Your fleet, though of formidable bulk, lies under my guns, and exists at my sufferance! Be warned, small creature!"

Retief drew his pistol and assumed a firing-range stance, left fist on hip, right arm, with gun, extended, and took careful aim at the point on the grounded ship's hull which, he knew, represented the location of the periscope lens. At his shot, a loudly amplified yelp erupted from the ship. At once, gun muzzles depressed until Retief could see several meters into their polished bores. He took out his pocket signaler and punched in the call-code for the ground car. Moments later, its arrival was signaled by a sudden jump in the direction of aim of the guns. Retief looked behind him. The small, highly polished official vehicle, poised daintily on its fore-and-aft wheels, sat on the ridge, silhouetted against the sky, now turning a soft violet with the onset of twilight. A split second later,

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gunfire roared out from the valley, and the car seemed to leap straight up, disintegrating at the top of its trajectory. Pieces rained down. A pneumatic wheel fell to the ground at Retief's feet. Landing flat, it rebounded a few inches and fell back.

"A pity you forced me to destroy your accomplices," the PA voice announced. "But you should not have fired at my ship—though of course your toy weapon caused me no damage. Now throw it aside and advance, slowly. I will meet you."

As Retief ostentatiously tucked the gun back in his pocket, a second wheel from the car came rolling past him, continued downslope, bounding high as it encountered obstacles in its path. White fire landed from a secondary turret of the grounded warship, scoring a gouge in the soil a foot to the right of the rolling wheel, which spun on, straight toward the vessel. A second shot missed by a wide margin.

"So—you attempt to take advantage of my good nature by dispatching missiles at me!" the voice roared out. A third shot blasted rock harmlessly, wide of the mark.

"Wait there!" the PA commanded.

Retief halted, watched as a small personnel hatch opened just aft of the ship's blunt prow. A large and ungainly three-legged creature clambered out, resembling an assemblage of old plumber's pipe and battered sheet metal. Faint clanging sounds came to Retief's ears as the creature descended the curved side of the ship via a series of rungs. It dropped the last few feet, turned, shied as the runaway wheel hurtled past, then started determinedly up toward Retief.

At a distance of ten feet the newcomer still resembled a hasty construction of scrap metal, but Retief recognized the arrangement of plates at the upper end as the visage of All Conqueror of Foes Cheese.

"That's close enough, Cheese," the Terran said.

The Basuran halted, his facial plates meshing restlessly.

"I see your spies have been busy," he said. "Ferreting out my identity."

"Your Excellency is too modest," Retief said. "Everyone on this planet knows by now of All Conqueror of Foes Cheese."

"Remarkable!" Cheese snorted. "But you presume too far, fellow, attempting to order me to halt, as if I were some common Maker of Threatening Gestures, First Class. I shall approach as closely as I desire." He took another step. Retief took the gun from his pocket,

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fired a blast into the dirt at Cheese's feet, sending a shower of gravel to rattle against the armored shins of the alien, who uttered a raucous cry and backed away.

"That is as close as I desire to come," he stated rather primly, turned and marched back downhill toward his ship. He had gone only a few steps when he stopped, turned, and made a sweeping gesture with a pipe-like arm.

"By the way, Admiral, I hereby notify you, just as a professional courtesy, that you may now consider your fleet and personnel captives of war. Also, this continent is now under Basuran occupation and rule. You may return to your king, or Principal Face-Maker, or whatever, and inform him of the new status of affairs."

"Wrong," Retief said. "It's you and your collection of junkers that are prisoners of war."

"What war?" Cheese demanded indignantly. "Insofar as I know, no war has been declared."

"Well, I'll declare," Retief said. "An oversight, no doubt. But ever since you violated Delician space, a state of war has existed between us."

"My, who'd have thought you'd be so touchy, and anyway, this planet was listed as 'uninhabited' in my handbook. But that's the way the egg cracks, eh?" Cheese whirled suddenly and set off at a run toward his ship.

"If you want to claim capture of an A. C. of F.," he called over his shoulder, "you'll have to catch me first."

Retief fired a shot which exploded a small boulder to the right of the fleeing Basuran's line of retreat. The latter shied violently and skidded to a halt.

"Anybody can shoot an A. C. of F. in the back," he said in a shrill voice. "But only a live captive will win you a million green stamps toward a Grand Cordon of the *Legion de Cosme.*" He turned and resumed his descent at a more moderate pace.

"I should warn you, I took the precaution of aligning and locking a battery of antipersonnel rifles on you before leaving my ship," Cheese called out. "I have in my hand the remote control unit which will activate them."

Retief took several steps sideways. As he did, a cluster of slim gun barrels projecting from a blister at the prow of the Basuran ship traversed smoothly to follow him. Cheese gave a triumphant cry and pointed, then turned and continued on his way.

A wheel from the destroyed ground car lay at Retief's feet. He picked it up, took aim, and

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sent it rolling downhill after the Basuran, who paused for a moment, with his head cocked as if listening, then proceeded on his way.

"I am not so callow as to be distracted by your ruse," he called. "You make furtive sounds, suggestive that you are creeping up on me from behind, in the hope that I will abort the firing of my armaments, lest I myself be caught in their withering blasts."

"A good point," Retief responded. "All I have to do is stay close to you and your automatics are neutralized." At that moment, fire spouted from the guns, accompanied by a sharp, multiple report which racketed back and forth across the valley. Retief felt the airblast as the covey of projectiles rushed past him to smack the slope behind him and erupt thunderously, sending high a shower of dirt and stones. Cheese turned quickly to observe the effects of his attack. His facial plates slid over each other and came to rest slackly, expressing astonishment as clearly as a dropped jaw and raised eyebrows. "Impossible!" he gasped. "My aim was true, my guns accurate to the millimeter!"

"Right," Retief nodded agreement. "But there's no rule that says I can't duck."

"Perhaps I underestimated the speed of your reflexes, Terran," Cheese conceded. "It seems my intelligence reports, if not my guns, were inaccurate."

"Those, and a few other things," Retief agreed.

The Basuran turned aside to catch up one of the tin-can-sized pellets of compressed grub-husk that littered the meadow. He studied it carefully, turning it over and over; then suddenly he thrust it into an orifice at the base of his short, thick neck. There was a crunching sound, like a pebble being pulverized between heavy gears. Cheese tossed aside the husk of the pellet, from which a large bite was now missing. "Not at all bad," he commented. "I must concede your rations are superior to those issued in the Basuran Navy." He glanced around at the hundreds of similar cylinders strewn around him. "But I must say your chaps are careless in their handling of such precious cargo."

"I've already spoken sharply to them about that," Retief said. The Basuran jumped suddenly aside as the wheel which had been rolling steadily toward him whizzed past, narrowly missing his shins.

"Missed me," Cheese cried, and scooped up a second garbage pellet. As he munched contentedly, the wheel rolled

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down across the last few yards of open ground and struck the side of his ship with a dull impact. Cheese whirled alertly. "A dud," he exulted and turned back to face Retief. The wheel, rebounding in a high arc, struck the ground behind Cheese and came rolling swiftly upslope. At the last moment the Basuran leapt aside, too late. The wheel caught him squarely, full in the back, and sent him sprawling, face-down among the wild flowers and litter.

"Cleverly done," came a faint cry from the background. The spindle-legged figure of Shluh emerged from the shadows in the lee of his mud-splattered yacht. He paused, turned to speak to someone out of sight behind him. "All is well, my dear," he whispered. "It's as I said; the situation is well in hand." A slight figure, even more spindle-legged than Shluh, and otherwise very similar, except for its garb, which consisted of a short, ribless hipcloak, came forth to stand beside him. Fine silver-gray sand was trickling down from the folds in their garments, Retief saw, as they came forward.

"My dear Lady Tish," Shluh piped. "To allow me to present a long-time associate, Mr. Retief, of the *Corps Diplomatique Terrestrienne*, of whom you have doubtless heard me speak, if not flatteringly, at least with feeling." Shluh turned to Retief. "Have I exaggerated the charms of my fair companion?" he inquired rhetorically.

"Confidentially," Retief said quietly, "I'll have to admit she's stacked up like a sheet-metal toolshed."

"We sophisticated cosmopolitan beings-of-the-galaxy have much in common, eh, Retief?" Shluh whispered. "In spite of our occasional differences arising from our naturally divergent viewpoints as representatives of competing species."

"Lady Tish," Retief addressed the female Groaci, "to have the honor to present All Conqueror of Foes Cheese, who's here on a little job of fleet capturing."

"To feel a trifle faint," Lady Tish said, graciously offering a grasping member to the Basuran.

"Charmed," the latter grated, in heavily accented Terran. "What's a nice-looking kid like you doing in the company of this pair of sharpers?"

"See here, Retief," Shluh broke in. "So much for the social amenities. But we have important business outstanding. Now, what about this foolishness of GROPE allegedly trying to throw its weight around by interfering in legitimate Groacian operations?"

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"You're surrounded," Retief pointed out. "Better give up."

"Eh?" Shluh barked, eyeing Cheese. "Who is this fellow Cheese, anyway? He, or it, looks to me like one of those feckless Basurans who've eaten themselves out of burrow and home. At my last briefing, they were reported begging us at GROPE for relief. Now it seems this was a mere ruse, to allow you unprincipled Terries to enslave yet another hapless breed and set them to doing your dirty work—in this case manning your illegal vigilante force."

"Wrong, you five-eyed pip-squeak," Cheese cut in harshly. "In the first place we Basurans don't beg, we *take*, and in the second we don't stooge for any bunch of Terries. We operate our own vigilante service. That's how come I caught you and your raiders flatfooted on the ground."

"Raiders, indeed!" Shluh hissed. "The vessels of my command with which you have so rashly interfered, to your eventual sorrow, are units of the Groacian Merchant Navy, bound on a peaceful errand."

"Oh, yeah?" Cheese responded airily. "I'll just take a look. Care to go along, cutie?" he offered an arm to Lady Tish, to whom he had addressed the invitation. She took it shyly, and they strolled off toward the nearest barge, stepping over the drifts of overspill from the garbage heap.

"The miscreant comports himself with an arrogance incompatible with his role as supplicant for GROPE aims," Shluh snorted. "And I suggest that now, whilst he's out of earshot, it would be as well if we concluded some agreement between ourselves in consonance with the dignity and integrity of the Groacian state."

"Agreement as to what?" Retief asked.

"As to the precise status of my little convoy of utility vessels, vis-a-vis your rather abrupt proposals of a few minutes since."

"To make a suggestion," Retief said. "If an alternative dumping-ground was made available to you. . ."

"In that case to willingly make use of it in future," Shluh breathed. "To assume of course adequate capacity for the volumes of debris generated by the vigorous Groacian way of life. Hark! to note the approach of the fellow Cheese."

The Basuran, with Lady Tish leaning on his arm, was sauntering toward them from the direction of Shluh's yacht.

"It seems," he called, "my G-2 chaps made a slight error in their identification of the precise nature of your convoy. Instead of war-hulls bristling

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with armaments, I find empty shells, unequipped even with individual guidance systems—mere stripped hulks. This is rather awkward for me, since I've already alerted High Command of my feat in neutralizing a major enemy force."

"To point out, initially," Shluh said, "that no state of official war has existed between our respective governments, prior, that is, to your audacious meddling here. Secondly, by intruding unbidden within the sacrosanct precincts of units of the Groacian Navy, you offer irremedial provocation."

"Looks like point number two takes care of technicality number one," Cheese responded cheerfully. "So now we're at war, OK, pal?" He paused to pat the hand of Lady Tish. "But that doesn't include you, doll, just these feckless fellows here."

Shluh seized Tish's hand and stalked away.

"If you hurry, maybe you can amend that report before it gets to the top," Retief suggested to the Basuran. "If I know my bureaucrats, this would be a good time for you to do a little emergency career salvage."

"Not to worry," Cheese said airily. "In light of the present logistical situation at home, my capture of a provision convoy and a major supply dump will go far to console High Command for the absence of a captive task force."

"You can make it better than that," Retief said. "Suppose you reported no need to launch and provision an invasion fleet, because you've arranged for delivery to your door of enough imported delicacies to keep Basur eating gourmet style for at least a Galactic year?"

"Ah, the vistas such a coup would open up are bright indeed, Terran. Kindly fill in the details of your capitulation offer. You know how headquarters types love statistics."

"What about a firm commitment of immediate shipments from seventy-nine worlds," Retief proposed.

"Sounds good—but quality has to be up to the standard of this sample." Cheese took another bite from the half-consumed cylinder of compressed gribble-grub husk in his hand and chewed noisily.

"Certainly," Retief assured him.

"But just a minute," Cheese said suspiciously. "What are you asking in return? I seem to recall that you had, by treachery, momentarily gotten the drop on me when your colleague appeared. That means dictating the settlement is your prerogative."

"Just load up your captured

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goodies and haul keel out of here," Retief said. "Tell your bosses the invasion plans are off—one sneaky move and the relief shipments are canceled."

"You surprise me, Terry. I didn't anticipate such generosity."

"Just be sure your boys police the area thoroughly before you seal hatches," Retief admonished the Basuran. "And you can call on Admiral Shluh's crews for help loading up."

"Exceptional," Cheese commented. "I see this moment as the beginning of a cordial *entente* between Basur and Terra. A splendid footnote to Galactic history, showing how beings of good will can iron out differences to their mutual benefit—though I confess I feel a bit abashed at having conceded so little in return for your unexampled magnanimity. Are you quite sure your government will sustain you in this *beau geste*?"

"Oh, I think they'll be satisfied," Retief said. "Mr. Magnan might even make Career Ambassador out of it."

Back at the office, Retief found Magnan slumped in a chair beside the windows commanding the view across the west lawn.

"Ah, there you are, Retief," the Career Minister sighed. "I've been at sixes and sevens as to just how to extricate myself from this miserable contretemps. As you know, I'm no whiner, but it seems to me Sector has heaped more on my plate than any mere mortal can deal with. Doubtless Director Straphanger will be back on to me at any moment, demanding impossible results. Why, I've no idea what to tell him to placate him for the moment. And while I wrestled along here with the Herculean labors assigned me by heedless Sector taskmasters, you absented yourself, doubtless enjoying a halcyon stroll in some sylvan dell."

"Didn't you notice the invasion?" Retief asked.

Magnan made choking sounds. Miss Taylor, seated across the room, sprang to her feet, an expression of alarm on her pert features.

"Whatever do you *mean?*" she cried. "Invasion?"

"The seven ships must have come directly over this building," Retief said. "Didn't you hear the shooting?"

"Shooting? Heavens!" Magnan yelped. "At whom? And by whom are we invaded?"

"This is no time for grammar," Miss Taylor said sharply. "Who in hell's butting in now to spoil Delicia?"

"All Conqueror of Foes Cheese," Retief said. "You'll recall he gave us fair warning."

"True enough," Magnan

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sighed. "I suppose we may as well accept the inevitable."

"Certainly," Miss Taylor agreed, "just so all those nasty creatures go away."

"Alas, I see they're already taking an owner's pride in their new acquisition," Magnan remarked, glancing out of the window. Below, a loosely organized line of Basurans and Groaci were moving steadily across the lawn, stooping to pick up each offending scrap of paper or rubbish.

"Oho!" Magnan cried. "Unless my vision fails me, those are Groaci, working cheek by jowl with the Basurans. I might have known that upstart A. C. of F. Cheese wouldn't have dared such insolence unless with powerful backing." He whirled on Retief. "It's as I suspected from the beginning: Groaci participation in GROPE was a mere gambit to infiltrate the organization and subvert its noble purpose."

At that moment the screen ping!-ed and lit up. The face of Director Straphanger appeared, wearing an expression of grim disapproval.

"Ah, well," Magnan sighed, his narrow shoulders drooping despondently. "As well to put a good face on the matter. . ." He approached the screen, adjusting a look of pleased surprise on his face.

"Why, Mr. Director, how flattering to receive another call so soon," he gushed. "I have matters well in hand, of course, and expect to report a complete solution to the Delician problem very soon."

"Gracious, Mr. Magnan," Miss Taylor cried. "I'm just positively busting with curiosity. Just how are you going to clear up all our problems here so quick, when Mr. Retief just said now we've got an invasion on top of all that trash out there?"

"Quite simply, my dear," Magnan said. "The *Corps* rids itself of the Delician problem by ridding itself of the source: Delicia. I intend to recommend that the planet be declared outside the Terran sphere of interest. Let the Basurans have it and welcome!"

"Why, you awful little man!" Anne cried, and swung the heavy leather purse she was holding by its foot-long straps. The bag, bulging with tight-packed contents, caught the slightly built diplomat on the side of the head and sent him reeling back against the desk, at which he grabbed ineffectually before sliding down to sprawl across it.

Retief stepped in and relieved the girl of the bag. Hefting it, he estimated its weight at ten pounds. He thumbed back Magnan's eyelid.

"Slight concussion, maybe,"

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he said. "I don't think I need to return your gun, Anne. You don't need it."

The screen emitted its tone and glowed into life. Barnshingle glared out at Retief.

"Mr. Director," Retief said, "Mr. Magnan hadn't quite finished his status report when you signed off last time. You'll be interested to know..." Retief briefly outlined the agreements with Shluh and Cheese.

"Bully for Magnan," Straphanger declared. "I think that clears his docket nicely, and clarifies a number of other matters which had been troubling us here at Sector as well. I think the way is cleared now for the immediate passage of the resolution declaring Delicia a Galactic park." His eyes cut to Magnan's limp form.

"Poor Ben," he rumbled. "Savaged by the Basurans, I assume?"

"Not quite, Mr. Director," Retief said. "You might say he was struck by the wild beauty of the place."

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Specimen

by JOHN CHRISTOPHER

UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE she was not sure that she would accompany him on the trip.

Things had been getting worse for some time. It was more a matter of slow estrangement than actual conflict. He worked hard and was tired at the end of his long days. There were good reasons for their seeing less of one another. But it was not just that. There was a sense of separation, a feeling that their gazes were set in different, even opposite directions.

And it was not as though the trip in itself held any attraction for her. She had never liked hunting, though both her mother and father had been devoted to it. She could take no pleasure in the killing of birds and animals, however much skill was brought to the act. This reluctance, revulsion, was something she accepted as a weakness in herself. She felt that she followed the judgment of her parents in doing so.

Yet hunting, oddly, had provided the origin of her marriage. She had joined her parents at the conclusion of a safari and met him there. Her father had praised him: he was an excellent shot. He paid attention to her and she was flattered. She realized at the time that her father's approval of him had a lot to do with that.

She had other reasons for liking him, of course. He was good-looking, charming and attentive. And she was attracted by the fact that, unlike other suitors her parents had smiled on, he had neither money or background. He was a salaried colonial official, with his way to make and a long way to go

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before he made it. His presence on the safari was due partly to his skill as a huntsman, partly to careful penny-pinching in advance.

The courtship had been brief. He had soon proposed and been accepted. There had been a very splendid wedding, and she had gone back with him to his remote colonial post. For a month they had been feverishly happy, for another six more quietly content. They had been married now for nearly a year.

In recent weeks, with time to brood, she had analyzed herself and him. There had been motives, she saw, beneath motives. As far as he was concerned, she had recognized at the outset that she was something of a catch, in view of her father's position in government and the family's great inherited wealth and social position. But she felt that, even knowing this, she had not properly grasped what she meant to him, nor understood in just what light he saw her. "Catch" was not quite the right word: "trophy" came nearer. He was a huntsman, after all. It had not been her money or her social advantages he sought so much as the accomplishment of a difficult project. She wondered bitterly if, having achieved it, he would not as soon have had her in a glass case, like the six-foot pike on the wall opposite his desk.

She tried to be honest with herself also. Her deep conflict had been with her parents, rooted in her twin needs—to yield to them and to defy them. He had offered her a way of escape from this with honor, with victory even. Although admiring him as a huntsman, they had certainly not wanted him as a son-in-law. But having approved of him before she met him, they could not withdraw that approval except on explicit financial and social grounds. Their pride, as she very well knew, forbade this. They had thought it entirely proper to screen her acquaintanceship, but to have raised such specific issues would have been an impermissible vulgarity.

It was not the first time, she reflected, that a marriage had been based on widely different needs and illusions, and one could expect the discord between them to become apparent once the honeymoon was over. The question was what came next.

If things were allowed to drift they would set: either into a marriage of convenience or divorce. The former was far more likely than the latter. He would not be keen on surrendering a trophy, however little it had come to mean to him. As for herself, she did not

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think she could bear the smiles—even though she would never see them—which her parents would exchange on hearing the news. It was a defeat she refused to contemplate.

So the motives beneath the motives could keep the marriage going, in form at least. That thought too revolted her. The defeat would be an internal one, but in its way even more fundamental.

There must be a solution. Somehow they must, both of them, rise above their limitations and build a true marriage. She was sure, although with a touch of desperation, that it was possible. She still respected him and believed that he respected her. She thought he could be as honest with himself as she had tried to be. Their interests and natures lay far apart, but with loyalty and goodwill they could build bridges. And in time those bridges, unlike the shimmering rainbow of illusions, would be strong enough for love to cross.

But it was not going to be easy, and the question of the trip obsessed her. She had been hurt when he applied for this, as his first leave since their marriage. It had been bitter that he had not consulted her, merely told her: two weeks up in the mountains, and he had managed to get a permit to kill a grizzly bear. They were a protected species and the hunting quota was very limited. There were many other things she would like to have done, almost nothing she would not have preferred.

She did not have to go with him. She could go away on her own—visit one of the ruined cities, perhaps. There was a lot to be said for that. Away from the tension of closeness without real contact she felt that she would be able to think more clearly. The physical separation could even help their relationship. When they came together again, they might look at each other with fresh eyes, and with better understanding.

Or of course the reverse could be true. By not going with him she might fix him in the stance that was beginning to emerge: replace indifference by antipathy.

Either way it was a gamble. Accompanying him also presented alternatives. Living primitively on their own together, they would be forced into intimacy. As things stood, there was no telling what that intimacy might produce. It might build the first bridge. Or the ground between them might finally split and leave them totally and forever isolated.

In the end she decided to go. He nodded acknowledgment but made no comment. He

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showed neither pleasure nor irritation.

After two days she was sure that she had done the right thing. They were easier with each other than they had been for months, and she felt that it was the right sort of easiness, a kind of constructive tolerance. There was no wild resurgence of passion—she had not been so silly as to imagine there could be—but a giving and taking, an amiability which seemed to be founded in strength.

The place itself helped. They camped in the foothills, by a clear shallow river that came down from the mountains that overlooked them. For more than a hundred miles in any direction there was nothing but wild life: animals, birds, fish in the river pools, and a thick profusion of trees and shrubs and autumn flowers.

The first snows had fallen and were white on the mountain tops. But the weather was fine now, the days clear and blue, evenings pleasantly sharpened by the touch of frost. At night the stars were big and coldly glowing, hanging heavy in the huge black sky. They looked no further away than the peaks of the mountains. Her eyes searched among them, nostalgic but without regret.

The beauty and the physical exhilaration touched them both. They experienced them in different ways, of course. To her they were something to accept, to be lulled by. To him they were a part of being in hunter's country and hunter's weather. But they shared a delight, an exaltation.

He left her behind while he hunted. She idled then, letting the sun soak deeply into her. When he returned with fish or game, she took it from him, cleaned and prepared and cooked it. She did not mind doing that. It had never been death she hated, but the act of killing.

The days went by and he did not get his grizzly. He talked about it and she listened, trying to blank out her prejudices and to a large extent succeeding. He had found trails and followed them, but without success. At least he knew that there were bears in the area. It was necessary to be patient.

"You could use the floater," she said, "instead of following the trail on foot. Wouldn't there be more chance of finding it from the air?"

"One has to hunt on foot."

"Because the permit says so? Does that matter? No one would know."

"It's the rule," he said. "One has to keep the rules."

It was meaningless to her, but she did not argue with him.

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She supposed that it was admirable, in a way, to have rules. What mattered was that he was happy and there was contact between them.

He said, "Of course, if I don't have any luck before it's time to go back, I may take a different view." He smiled. "I want that skin!"

She smiled with him. It was childish but endearing, and being a confession, it brought them closer. She had done the right thing.

He killed his grizzly with a day to spare. He used the floater to bring it back to camp. He skinned it there, and gave her bear steaks to cook that evening. It was a mature male, seven feet from nose to tail. He was very pleased with himself. Sitting by the fire, under the stars, he said:

"It's all worked out."

She said, "Yes. I'm glad."

"I was wondering—is there anything you would like to do? Anything in particular?"

She saw this as another sign of the new and potentially much stronger link between them. He had fulfilled his own needs, and it was something that having done so he could think of her. In fact there was nothing she wanted—the situation in itself was enough—but she felt it was important to make a response. She said:

"I thought. . ."

"Yes?"

"It might be nice to take the floater up to one of the mountain peaks."

"Why not?" he said. "Yes, we'll do that tomorrow."

The fire fell in on itself and he tossed on another log. It crackled and flames leapt up. She looked up at the stars. They were far away and unimportant.

The weather changed during the night. Warm air came in from the west, bringing with it a fine mist of rain. That pleased him also. Having held fine long enough for him to make his kill, it was appropriate that the weather should break now. And the cloud level was low, he reckoned; they would soon rise above it in the floater.

The calculation was correct. The floater rose up, through dark into light grey, into pearl and flashing gold, at last into the sharp blue lying over a rippled opaque sea of white. The mountains lifted their still-whiter tips out of this. They headed for the one of her choice, through a world that held no life except for themselves and a single hovering eagle. She wondered if he would want to kill it, and was glad when he did not.

They picknicked on snow and basked in hot dazzling

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sunshine. The day drifted by, with both of them content and drowsy. In the afternoon the sea of white beneath them began to break up. It showed first clefts, then valleys full of the wild luxuriance of green, of life.

She had known few days in which she had been so much at peace; perhaps none. But she had no regret when he decided that it was time to get back. They had been together here and were going back together.

There were only small patches of cloud left. He took the floater down until they were less than fifty feet above the treetops. Sitting beside him, she looked down into undulating wooded countryside, punctuated by streams and small clearings. Animals ran from the shadow of their passing. He was unconcerned. There is an end to everything, she thought, even the lust to kill.

Then he said, "Look!"

"What?"

She was startled by the urgency and excitement in his voice.

"Over there. . ."

He banked and turned the floater. She saw nothing at first except a thick clump of trees on the edge of a clearing through which went a stream. Then something broke away and ran, into the stream and splashing along it. She recognized it at once though she had never seen one before, only pictures.

He put the floater after it in chase and at the same time reached for the gun in the rack beside him. She cried out:

"You can't. . ."

"What a specimen!"

"They're absolutely protected. You know that."

"Except in self-defense. Who's to say it wasn't? They do attack sometimes."

She remembered her own words to him about the grizzly. "No one would know." It was true. She said:

"You can't. You mustn't."

He did not answer. He was intent on the chase. The beast ran down the stream, and the stream twisted between trees that stood close. It was difficult for him to get a clear view for a shot. But she saw something else. Not far ahead the stream ran into an open space again. He would have a view then. His indrawing of breath showed that he had seen it too.

But at the last moment the beast left the stream. It veered sharply to the left, crashing through undergrowth, and he got in a single shot. It missed. After that the animal was under the cover of thickly tangled woodland, seeming to stretch for miles.

He cursed. She was silent as

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he swung the floater round in a tight arc. The chase was over and he had failed. Nothing could be spotted under that cover, and there was nowhere, in any case, where the floater could be landed. Dusk was drawing down. He could not possibly start to hunt it on foot today, and tomorrow morning they must go back to the post.

He would be angry, but she could tolerate the anger in the consolation of his having failed. It would have been unbearable if he had killed it. Beside that, anger was nothing much to endure.

But looking at him, she saw that the anger had gone already. He said thoughtfully:

"They're very cunning. A decoy? I wonder. . ."

He took the floater back, following the stream in the reverse direction. They reached the clearing with the thick clump of trees out of which the beast had broken. He brought the floater very low, skimming the highest branches. He said, with excitement:

"Yes! I thought so."

On the second pass he fired at random into the trees. Something moved and ran, not into the clearing but out of the cover of the trees into scrub. Most of it was in view. He raised the gun again.

She said, in much greater horror than before:

"No! Can't you see? It's a female—and gravid."

He had already fired. She grabbed at the gun and at the same moment saw the beast stagger and fall. He swung the floater round and brought it to rest beside his kill.

They got out of the floater and stood together looking at it. It lay on its side, its weight crushing a small bush laden with blue berries. Blood from the wound in its back stained the berries and the surrounding earth.

She stared at the dead beast. The skins it had worn as covering had fallen away, showing the white hairless skin underneath. It looked pitiful and grotesque. It was hard to believe that such a poor forked mammalian creature had once ruled this planet and built the great cities which their ancestors, sweeping down out of the skies, had destroyed.

His crest, that relic from infinitely more remote reptilian ancestors, had drooped and was no longer flushed but pallid. He had gained nothing by it. He could never display this specimen. The species, dwindling into extinction, was absolutely protected. And an excuse of shooting in self-defense would not serve in the case of a pregnant female.

It was all a waste. And on this waste, she knew, their

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marriage had finally ended. It would continue in form—their different prides would see to that—but as a rotting corpse not as a living thing.

The other corpse lay at her feet. There was a name for the female, she remembered. Woman.

She had no pity left. This, by its existence and then by its death, had destroyed her hopes. She hated it even more than she hated him. She turned away, suppressing the wild impulse to rake its naked flesh with her claws, and ran towards the floater.

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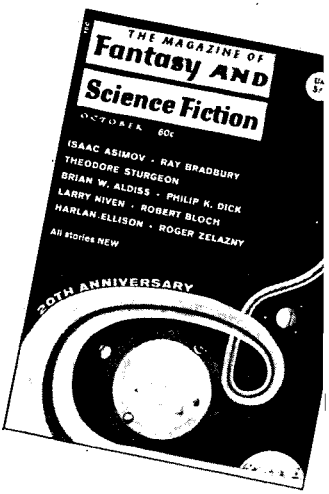

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